

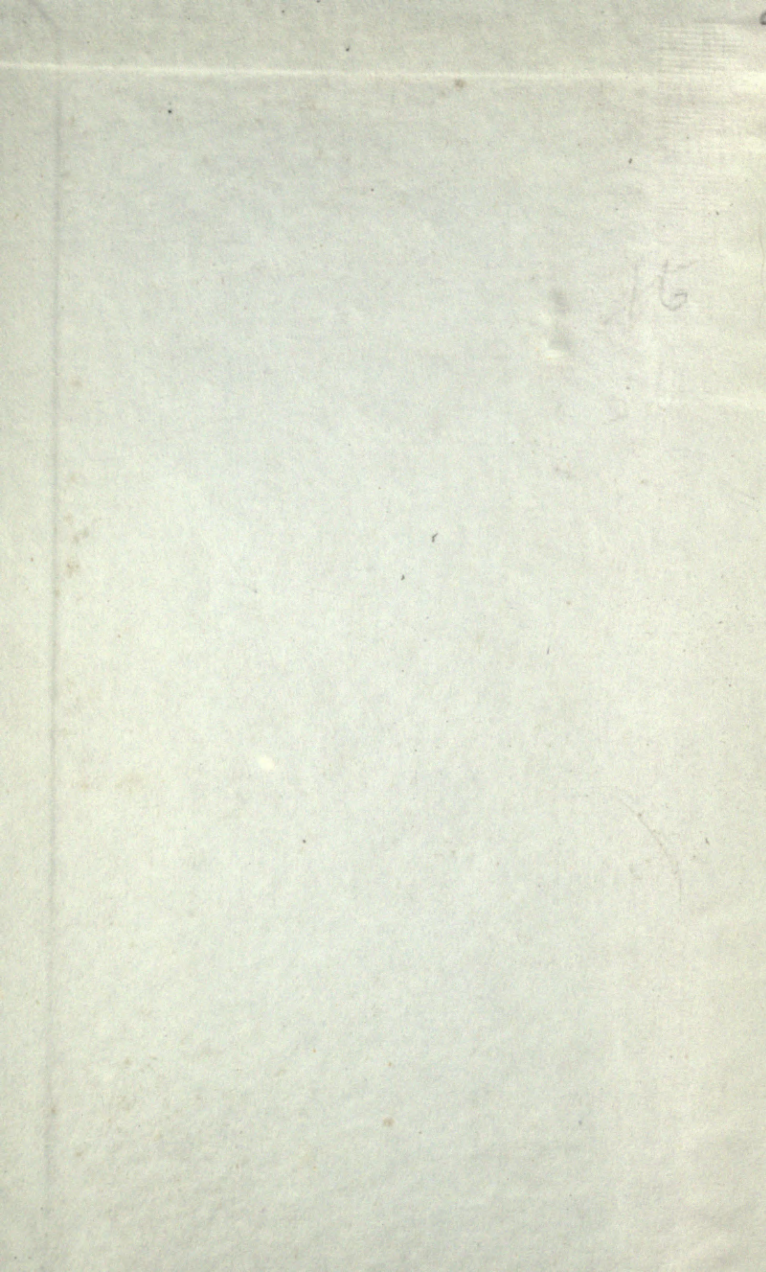
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BILL SEES IT
THROUGH



BILL SEES IT THROUGH

An Exciting Adventure Story

by

JOHN LODGE

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IT THROUGH
BILL SEES

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CHAPTER I

A BARGAIN

THE whole thing may be said to have started on the Monday morning—the last day of Bracken's traditional half-term holiday. Bracken considered half-term as a Blessing and a Boon—it was always thought of in capital letters! The school was released for three solid days, from Friday night to Monday evening; released so that the pupils might plague their parents, guardians and relations and thus enable the teaching staff to gather together sufficient strength to continue to the end of the term. The staff, in fact, regarded the holiday with thanksgiving even more devout than did their weary pupils.

Bill Maxwell little thought when he took a fond and tender farewell of his preceptors on Friday evening and departed for his paternal roof, that something was to happen during the brief holiday which would, if not exactly alter the course of his life, at any rate gravely affect him and his friends. Bill, red of hair and with a slim athletic body, possessed a brain—but rarely used it in school. Out of school it was put to very good use in one way and another. Impulsive, optimistic and entirely lacking in the finer feelings—according to his father—Bill was never bored and saw to it that his friends in Parson's House were not either. Study 6, in fact, had a pretty poor reputation, taking it all round. The powers regarded the apartment as being the centre of all trouble and were exceedingly sorry that they could rarely prove this supposition.

Bill, coming down to breakfast on the Monday morning, was feeling a trifle cast down. A crisis had arisen in his financial affairs. The end of the half-term holiday found him as broke as made no difference, a disastrous state of affairs with half the summer term still to run. At the thought of long, lazy July days without ices and cold drinks, Bill's soul writhed in agony. Something had to be done and done quickly. The obvious move was to apply to the parental purse, but if such a thought entered Bill's mind it was only

to be rejected. Mr. Maxwell was a wealthy man, and having retired from making money on the Stock Exchange had bought Snelling Manor in Cumberland, only some thirty miles from Bracken. Wealthy though he was, however, he had brought Bill up to appreciate the value of money, and was moreover a man of his word. Bill had a fixed allowance and a generous one. If he squandered it, then that was his affair. No more cash would be forthcoming until the fixed date. Bill, therefore, knew that it was hopeless to approach his father.

His mother would almost certainly be more amenable, but Bill had his own code of honour. If the gov'nor had made a rule, then it was not cricket to evade it by working on his mother's more tender feelings. So Bill shrugged his shoulders on this Monday morning, eyed the egg and bacon with disfavour, but eventually found himself with enough appetite to tackle the viands—plus oceans of toast and marmalade. Snelling, being tucked away in the wilds, received its morning post at about ten o'clock. It was not until Bill had nearly finished his breakfast, therefore, that the letters were delivered.

"One for you, Bill," said Mr. Maxwell, "and do you mean to say you haven't finished breakfast yet? Good heavens, I've done a couple of hours in the garden. I don't know what you youngsters are coming to."

Bill, who at the age of seventeen disliked being called a youngster, sniffed audibly, and murmured something about recovering after a half-term's strenuous work. He certainly had worked hard, but perhaps not in the way his father would have wished.

"From Aunt Juniper," he continued, opening the letter. "Gosh, look at that!" he gasped, holding between finger and thumb a pink slip of paper. "A cheque for £10!"

Immediately the sun seemed to shine more brightly, the sky to take on a more translucent blue. Life was once more worth living. Aunt Juniper, an autocratic old lady who lived very near to Bracken, had once more risen to the occasion. She was in Bill's opinion, a gem.

"How nice of her," murmured Mrs. Maxwell, "and how lucky it should come just when you're so hard up."

Mr. Maxwell looked suspicious, but said nothing. He had a fairly shrewd idea that Bill had dropped a hint to Aunt

Juniper that his money was running out. In his opinion his sister spoiled the boy. Bill, anxious in case any foolish ideas regarding the spending of the £10 should be put forward, ideas which he had not the slightest intention of following but which were nevertheless better left unsaid, tucked the cheque into his pocket, hastily swallowed his coffee and departed. The cook, watching him from the kitchen window—Bill using the back route to reach the village—smiled and wondered what the “young rip” was up to now. The expression described Bill exactly, as he strolled idly towards the village, the Bracken blazer clashing horribly with the fiery red of his hair, his hands in his pockets, a blissful expression on his face. Bill always looked as if he were up to something, and never more so than when he had £10 in his pocket!

Since Mr. Maxwell had moved from London to Snelling, Bill had gained many hours on his half-term holiday. In the old days he had been forced to leave home early on Monday morning in order to reach Bracken by the evening. Nowadays he was able to lounge about at home until tea-time, arriving at Bracken well before the dead-line of 10 p.m. Five hours to cover thirty miles may sound fantastic, but before you pass judgment allow me to suggest that you try a cross-country journey in Cumberland or Westmorland without the aid of a car. Mr. Maxwell positively refusing to drive his son back to school—he hated cars—Bill was forced to use three trains, two buses and his own legs.

But not this year. For Bill arrived at Bracken in style. He also arrived in one piece, which, considering his means of transport, was to be wondered at. Accustomed as he was to what is poetically termed the whirligig of time, to the rapid and often apparently senseless changes a few short hours can bring, even Bill was a trifle astounded at the swift pattern of events which led up to his arrival at Bracken, trailing clouds of glory. Looking back on the whole course of the affair from its beginning—which was certainly Aunt Juniper’s munificent gift of £10—it was staggering to realise how the trivial may eventually culminate in to the tremendous; how Destiny, her tongue in her cheek, plays about with her frail human pawns.

Something happens, something quite insignificant. “Pooh, that’s nothing,” says the pawn, “that doesn’t mean a thing.”

"Ah! doesn't it?" says Destiny, "we'll see about that."

And she throws some other apparently insignificant trifle in your way. Again the pawn sneers and yet again the trivial makes its appearance. There is no need to labour the moral. Before the pawn knows what it is all about, tremendous events have crowded in, all originating from that first trivial incident.

Thus it was with Bill. His squandering of his allowance led him to hint to Aunt Juniper that a tip would not come amiss. This in turn led to the receipt of £10, which in turn enabled him to purchase . . . But we are going too fast. Like Destiny, we will reveal the details one by one in proper order.

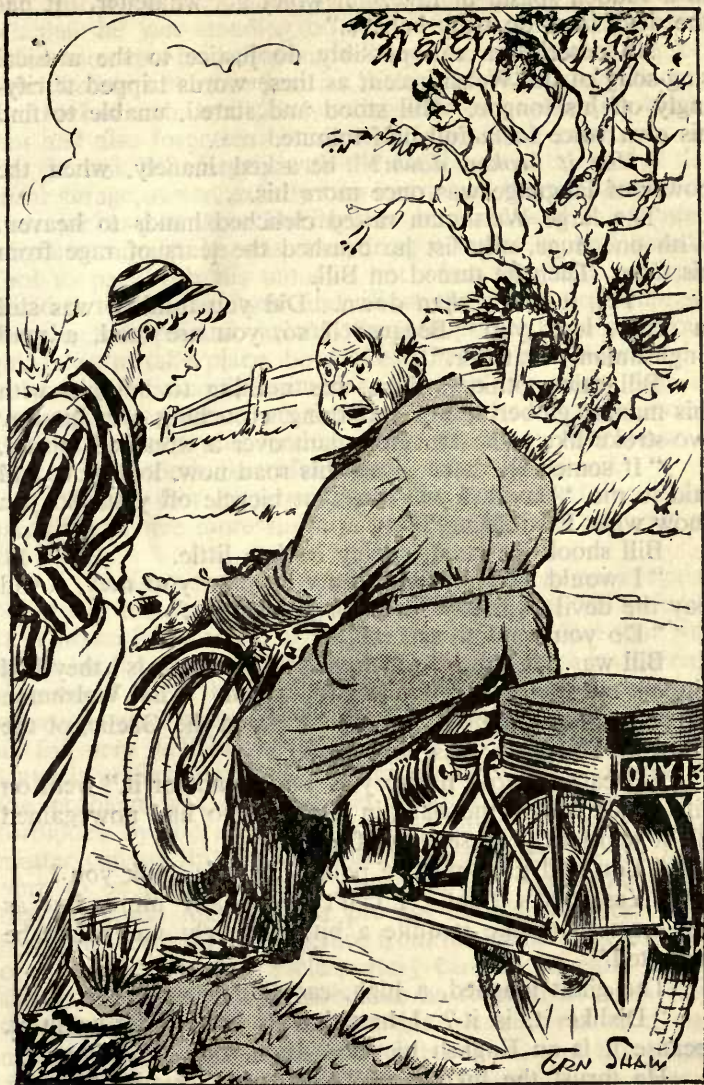
As Bill walked towards the village of Snelling, he whistled cheerfully. The place boasted a small bank, open twice a week only. Fortunately, Monday was one of its opening days. Bill, who knew the cashier in charge well, pushed in and presented his cheque. It was not drawn on this particular branch, but the cashier made no trouble about handing over the money. Mr. Maxwell was a reputable man and Bill thus came in for some reflected glory.

"Don't spend it all at once," said the cashier cheerfully, as he pushed the notes across the counter.

Bill grinned, rammed the money into his blazer pocket and retraced his steps. The village was small and offered few temptations even to Bill. He was a natural bargain hunter, purchasing very often all manner of useless articles just because he thought them cheap. Knowing his own faults, he was glad Snelling had only one general shop and that temptation was therefore removed.

Never was man or boy more wrong, however, than was Bill Maxwell when he decided that Snelling held no traps for him. He had not progressed four hundred yards from the village before he came across a large man and a small motor-bike engaged in a life and death struggle by the side of the road. The man was huge and completely bald, the top of his head being burned to a fiery red. Across his high and noble forehead a large smear of oil was blazoned. From each eye fell a tear. Unexpectedly, he proved to be a Welshman.

"This motor bicycle, look you," he screamed at Bill,



"Has it broken down?" he asked inanely.

in a sudden spasm of rage, "it won't go, whateffer. It has the devil in, I do truly believe."

No description can possibly do justice to the musical sing-song of the Welsh accent as these words tripped terrifyingly off his tongue. Bill stood and stared, unable to find his own voice for a full half minute.

"*Has it broken down?*" he asked inanely, when the power of language was once more his.

The large Welshman raised clenched hands to heaven. With one huge, oily fist he brushed the tears of rage from his face. Then he turned on Bill.

"Yes, it has broken down. Did you think it was still in order, look you? Because if so, you are mad, a mad Englishman, whateffer."

Bill said nothing; there was nothing to be said with this maniac gibbering and mouthing, crouching over his tiny two-stroke like some fantastic giant over a wretched mortal.

"If somebody came along this road now, look you, and said to me, 'David, I will buy that bicycle off you,' do you know what I would say?"

Bill shook his head, edging back a little.

"I would say, you may have her, so you may. And may the devil its master care for you and it."

"Do you want to sell it?"

Bill was not quite sure why he said the words; they had slipped out before he could stop them. The Welshman stopped in the middle of an exposition, in the Gaelic, of the motor-bike's many vices, and stared.

"Because if so, I'll give you five pound for it," went on Bill, egged on by the bargain demon who had now gained full if temporary possession of his soul.

"You will give me five pound for this, look you?"

"Yes, that's right. I can't afford any more, but as you seem to dislike it quite a bit, I thought you might be interested."

The giant laughed, a high, cackling laugh.

"Dislike it, is it? I hate it! It has no virtue in it, because it is an English bicycle. It is yours, look you."

He thrust the bike at Bill and turned his back on it.

"It will kill you," he added, throwing the remark over his shoulder before setting off at a fast walk towards Snelling.

Bill stood there grasping the handlebars, not quite sure whether he was standing on his head or his heels. After a few moments he pulled himself together sufficiently to prop the bike up and run after the Welshman, who had not only overlooked such details as handing over the registration book, but had also forgotten to ask for the purchase price.

It took Bill, largely with the assistance of the son of the local garage owner, exactly two hours and twenty minutes to start the two-stroke. During one hundred and thirty nine of these minutes he was wondering whether he had been a fool to part with his money; but when the bike suddenly decided to behave itself and allow the petrol to vaporise, the plug to spark and various other complicated and ingenious processes to take place, he decided that he had picked up a bargain. It certainly seemed so, for the two-stroke was in fairly good condition on the whole, the bad starting being due to a sticky plug and a faulty magneto. For once it looked as if the seeker after bargains had struck oil.

"Lucky that chap was mad," he said cheerfully, as he parted with five more shillings and wheeled the bike out of the garage.

A thought struck him and he wheeled it back again. What was the use of having a motor-bike if you had to leave it at home for the rest of the summer term? And that was undoubtedly what would happen if once either of his parents discovered what he had acquired. There were countless occasions when a two-stroke would be invaluable at Bracken, as Bill very well knew; it would be maddening to have to leave it at Snelling until the end of July. The solution to the problem was quite simple. Motor-bikes were strictly forbidden by the school authorities, but that aspect of the matter caused Bill not a moment's headache. Beaks were born to be bested, was his motto, and he had little doubt that he could manage that process in this instance. The bike could be kept at a distance from the school; the exercise of a certain amount of elementary care in selecting routes should render him quite safe once he reached Bracken with the bike. In order to achieve this pleasant result, it was necessary to say nothing about his purchase, and Bill hoped devoutly that his curious parents—inquisitive, not queer—would ask no awkward questions at lunch. It was quite likely that they would ask point blank if he had yet spent any of

his ill-gotten gains, in which case there would be no alternative but to answer truthfully. Bill's code might on occasions seem elastic, but at least he had one.

Fortunately, neither Mr. Maxwell nor his wife asked any awkward questions. They were by now innured to Bill and his ways, leaving him for the most part to go his own gait, knowing that he had his head fairly well screwed on his shoulders. After lunch Mr. Maxwell departed for the links, where he had an appointment to play Colonel Snipe.

"I hope you don't mind me going," he said to Bill, after saying goodbye to his son and heir for another six weeks, "but I've got a feeling I'm going to beat old Snipe this afternoon. Here's another pound, by the way."

Bill expressed suitable thanks and watched his father off. The gov'nor was a decent sort, he reflected. He might easily have hung on to the pound, knowing that Bill was in funds. Mrs. Maxwell also produced a similar sum, so that by the time Bill departed, ostensibly to catch the 'bus, he was in clover. He had paid £5 for the bike and still had £7 in cash. Not so bad!

In the box-room at home his suitcase was carefully hidden away, a rucksack now holding pyjamas and tooth-brush. By four o'clock he was riding unlawfully over the hills towards Bracken, singing as he went. Nearly everybody was happy. Mrs. Maxwell was happy in the belief that her son was on his way back to school by the orthodox routes; Bill was happy because he was astride the two-stroke and not slogging it to Bracken by 'bus and train. As for Mr. Maxwell, he was happy because he had beaten the colonel on the fourteenth green. The Welshman it is true was not happy, but that didn't worry Bill.

The air was like wine as the bike climbed the hills. Twenty-nine miles lay between Snelling and Bracken, the road running through wild scenery and passing through the pretty villages of Great Firkin and Winton Earls, before swinging down to Windermere lake and Bracken. It was exactly twenty minutes after starting that the calamity occurred. Out of a side road a car nosed its way. If it had not been for the fact that the driver of the car was half turning round to fling some words over his shoulder, the accident would not have happened. As it was, Bill's horn did not attract his attention until too late; the man

pulled violently at the wheel, shot across the road, tried to climb the bank, failed miserably, and found himself reclining in the ditch, the car having slowly tipped sideways. Bill, untouched, brought the bike to a standstill and got off.

His enquiry regarding the health and well-being of the two occupants of the car brought down a hail of abuse.

"What do you think you're doing?" demanded the large, red-faced man, who had been sitting behind the driver of the car. It may be said that the enquiry was not so simply stated as this; it had various decorative embellishments added to it.

Bill looked at him in surprise.

"But my dear chap," he said, "it wasn't my fault. Your driver wasn't looking where he was going. I sounded the horn, you know, but he took no notice."

Now there are two large sections in every community; there are those whom you can address as "my dear chap" with impunity, and there are those who grind their teeth, pull their hair and generally run up walls at the mere mention of the phrase. The unpleasant gentleman was one such.

"Unless you want a clip round the ear," he said, "you'd better learn a better piece than that. You *were* looking where you were going, *weren't* you, Tom?"

The driver, an undersized little rat of a man, whose shabby clothes were in striking contrast to his companion's glaring checks, looked up from an examination of his person.

"Garn," he said expressively.

The incident might have had unpleasant results if it had not been for the timely arrival of a fresh-faced Westmorland policeman. Heaven knows what area his beat covered; twenty square miles, perhaps, or even more. Yet there he was, right on the spot when needed.

He arrived pushing a pedal bicycle, helmet on the back of his head, the perspiration running down his broad face in rivulets.

"Ah, and what's all this?" he demanded.

"This brat 'ere comes rushing along at about sixty miles an hour and makes straight for me," said the rat-like driver, speaking rapidly through his nose. "I swerved and 'e crowded me into the ditch. I'll have the law on 'im, that's what I'll 'ave."

It is a remarkable fact that those who most frequently break the law spend the rest of their time invoking its aid. The policeman looked sharply at the rat-like one—he may have been aware of this face—and then turned to Bill.

"Your licence, sir? And your insurance certificate?"

Bill thanked his lucky stars that he had a driving licence. The insurance certificate and the registration book presented more difficulties, but the policeman seemed to understand all about it when Bill explained that the bike had only just come into his possession and was still taxed and insured under the previous owner's name.

"But his policy allows any other licensed driver to use the bike," said Bill, "and she is taxed."

The policeman nodded, taking down the particulars of the driving licence, Bill's address at Bracken and the Welshman's address in his native Glamorgan.

"I expect that will be all right, sir," he said. "We'll check up, of course. Now then, there's something I want to say to you two gentlemen," he added, turning suddenly on the large, unpleasant man and his companion. "I was taking a short cut along the path over yonder," he pointed to the hills, "and I saw the accident. Now what have you got to say?"

Not much, it appeared. This unlooked for descent of the god in the machine more than upset rat's fabrication; it split it asunder.

The constable glanced at Bill.

"You can be moving off if you like, sir. It wasn't your fault, and it's lucky I was up on the hills."

Bill needed no second bidding. He did not like either rat or red-face, and unlike the theme of the famous song had a shrewd idea why. He had rarely seen more unpleasant specimens of the *species homo sapiens*. With a friendly farewell for the policeman, he jumped on the bike, thanked fate that it started at the first kick and went on down the hill. The whole incident had occupied only fifteen minutes, but they were unusually important minutes. If the accident had not happened, then, of course, Bill would not have been driving through Great Firkin at exactly the right moment to enable the other pieces of the puzzle to fit themselves together so neatly; if rat and his friend had not been delayed . . . But there you are; as I said in the beginning, Destiny

was up to her tricks, and the pawn, as represented by Bill, was unconscious of the significance of the incidents of the day. Things might have turned out very differently if Bill had not driven through Great Firkin at twenty minutes past five that afternoon, if he had not had the accident, if he had not bought the bike, if Aunt Juniper had not stumped up, if he had not had an ingenious brain, if . . . You can go on for ever, arriving eventually at the crucial fact that if Bill had not been born this story would not have been written. Some people might say that it was a pity he ever was born.

CHAPTER II

PROFIT AND LOSS

WHEN in Parson's House some hours later Bill pushed open the door of the study which he graced with his presence, there was a partially dismembered body on the table. Its head lay at a horrible angle, its stomach was neatly slit open, revealing an interior from which Bill hastily averted his eyes. He was not so surprised at the sight of the corpse, however, as you or I would have been, for he was accustomed to the foul habits of those who shared the study with him. He merely looked the other way and addressed the back of a slim, fair-haired youth who was fumbling in the interior of the large cupboard.

"I say, Feathers, need you do this sort of thing here?"

He took a second hurried glance at the table and its gruesome contents, hastily snatched up an opened tin of sardines which was nestling cosily against the feet of the corpse and placed it carefully to one side.

"Though I have lived for some considerable time in this hovel," he continued, receiving no reply from Feathers, "I have not yet acclimatised myself to your disgusting habits. There must be thousands of places where you can practise your frightful hobby in peace and quiet. Why pick the supper table?"

Feathers straightened himself up and approached the temporary mortuary slab. He regarded the dead weasel with earnest eyes.

"If Cuthbert wasn't poisoned," he said slowly, "I'll eat my hat. I mean to find out."

Bill, whose hurried inspection had failed to reveal the identity of the corpse, made hasty amends.

"Sorry, Feathers, I didn't know it was Cuthbert. How did it happen?"

That ardent naturalist shook his head mournfully. He had returned from the half-term exeat to find Cuthbert dead and cold, though Farmer Wythes up at Peartree, who housed and maintained Feathers' private menagerie, swore that the weasel had received every care and attention.

"He'd been fed all right," said Feathers, vainly trying to prove this by showing Bill the contents of the animal's interior. "There's something fishy going on," he added, "and I mean to get at the bottom of it."

He returned to his gruesome task, leaving Bill feeling rather flat. After looking forward to retailing the adventures of the day, it was disappointing to find himself pushed aside by a defunct weasel. However, Feathers never had been really human when engrossed in his hobby. Study 6 were willing to give him full marks as an animal expert, but as they frequently pointed out, he showed a decided tendency to take his hobby to extremes. Though they had grown accustomed to discovering odds and ends of bodies in various stages of decay littering up their cupboards and even jumbled up with the food, they still did not like it.

Having decided that there was no point in talking to somebody who would not listen anyway, Bill had just resigned himself to waiting another hour or so—the twins were not likely to be back before the last minute—when the door was kicked open and those two worthies stood on the threshold.

"Well, what's the answer?" demanded Batty, the elder by five minutes, advancing to the window-seat and there spilling out a handful of coins and three pound notes.

Batty was a boy who believed in striking at the root of the matter, of cutting the cackle and getting on with the job.

"Ten bob from Uncle George, the same from Aunt Henrietta, a quid from the guv'nor, another from the mater, and six bob from sister Susie. That's not so bad, though it was a bit wearing wringing it out of them. Sleepy here has only got three quid because he insisted on eating too much on the way up."

Feathers, dragged away from his post-mortem, contri-

buted to the heap two one-pound notes and some silver. He then returned to his gruesome task.

"Come on, Bill, fork-up," said Sleepy hopefully, indicating with a flourish the heap of boodle on the window-seat.

It had been the habit of Study 6, ever since it had been a study, or rather since the present occupants had adorned it, to pool their worldly wealth at the beginning of every term and half-term. Bill, endowed with wealthy parents, could always be counted on for a handsome contribution. His donation of £5, however, was large enough to make the others stare. This was wealth indeed.

"Been robbing the bank?" enquired Batty politely, placing the ill-gotten gains carefully in a battered tin box.

Bill, who had a fondness for the dramatic, smiled in what he hoped was a languid manner.

"That's nothing," he said. "There would have been more, only a couple of bargains turned up and I couldn't resist them."

Now Study 6 had in the past had experience of Bill's purchases. They were not likely to forget the time when he had brought back a lawn-mower and patent wringer, items which, however commendable in themselves, served little purpose at Bracken, where the lawns were tended by professionals and the laundry by certain harpies who had no use for wringers unless they were guaranteed to tear the clothes.

"A couple of bargains," murmured Batty thoughtfully. "I see. And what exactly is the idea? Don't you know the rules?"

It may seem hard that Bill should not be allowed to spend his money as he liked, but it must be remembered that Study 6 had put up with his vagaries for a long time and were sick of housing useless articles. It was understood that all funds should be pooled, and Bill's habit of purchasing so-called bargains before arriving at Bracken was considered a violation of a gentleman's agreement. Therefore Batty turned a severe eye on the culprit.

"Well, come on. What did you buy?"

Bill, confident that the study would for once approve of his first purchase, kept them in suspense as long as he could. Eventually, however, when he had driven Batty to the limit and that worthy was rolling up his sleeves preparatory to administering corporal punishment—he was an expert at unorthodox fighting—he capitulated.

“All right, I’ll spill the beans. It was like this . . .”

Carefully he recounted the story of Aunt Juniper’s gift and the purchase of the two-stroke from the crazy Welshman, ending with the accident above Great Firkin.

“And I suppose the beastly bike is all messed up, and you’ve chucked away five quid,” accused Sleepy grimly.

“That’s where you’re wrong. The bike wasn’t touched. It’s as good as new.”

Batty and Sleepy looked sceptical, and even Feathers found time to look up from his investigation of Cuthbert’s inside to snort derisively.

“And what else did you buy?” pursued the inexorable Batty.

“Well, after the bobby let me go, I got to Great Firkin rather early. I saw a notice advertising an auction sale, so . . .”

“You went in and spent money like water, I suppose,” finished Batty for him.

That, it appeared, was more or less what had happened. The sale had been at a large house on the outskirts of the village, the proceedings being nearly over when Bill had arrived. He was just in time, however, to make a bid for Lot 495.

“Books,” he said, hauling out a pile of volumes which he had brought from Great Firkin strapped to the carrier of the two-stroke. “The auctioneer chap said they comprised a fine lot of bird books, so I thought Feathers might like them.”

Feathers fell on the pile eagerly. Ever since he could remember, and certainly ever since the others could remember, he had been crazy over animals and birds. There was not a soul at Bracken who could touch him at his own game, even Manders, the junior English master, who was keen on the same hobby, going into raptures when Feathers showed him his finds. Every spare moment of his time Feathers spent exploring the Bracken district in search of wild life. His patience was incredible, for he seemed to think nothing of lying for hours motionless on his stomach watching for a rare bird.

Now he hastily scanned the titles of the books Bill had bought. On close examination it proved that there were four bird books, the other three volumes comprising two ancient Latin text-books and a shabby little notebook which seemed

at one time to have been a scrapbook, for on the first page were pasted several news cuttings. Feathers flicked over the pages of the bird books and then turned to Bill.

"How much did you pay for this lot?"

"Two quid," replied Bill hopefully. "Are they all right?"

Feathers grinned and threw one of the books at Bill's head.

"Hardly, you chump. One of them, the only decent one, I've already got. The others are junk. Worth about a tanner each, I should think."

Bill, who could never be persuaded that any of his purchases was not a bargain, looked incredulous.

"But there were a couple of other chaps bidding for them," he said. "If they wanted them, they must be O.K."

"Never heard of the old dodge of getting a pal to make the running?" enquired Batty sarcastically. "You've been had for a mug, Bill. Whose things were they selling?"

"A chap named Captain Webb, I think. Anyway, I bet the books are worth something."

The rest of Study 6 were more inclined to accept the word of the expert Feathers that the books were valueless.

"I suppose it's no good grouching," said Sleepy. "Bill is a chump, but there you are!"

This was true, and, after all, Bill had contributed more than anybody else to the pool. Study 6 were quite convinced that the bike would also prove a wash-out and a useless expense, but there was nothing to be done about it.

At the moment the two-stroke was housed in the small shed on the junior cricket ground, a site which it would have to leave at the earliest opportunity if the authorities were to remain in ignorance of its existence. There were several alternative lodgings for it, but all would cost money to hire. Study 6, however, having vented its feelings, played the game. Bill, they considered, was a fool and a rogue; but the boodle always had been pooled, and would be on this occasion. The upkeep of the bike would have to come out of the common fund.

"Let's have a look at the beastly thing," said Batty, when this point had been settled.

"It's common property," remarked Bill, "don't forget that. And it might come in jolly useful, you know."

This was the sort of thing they really expected of Bill.

He might be a fool and he might make mistakes, but at any rate he was not mean.

"Come on, Feathers," said Batty, dragging the naturalist away from the cleaning of his instruments by main force.

Feathers sorrowfully picked up the box in which reposed the remains of Cuthbert and followed them out of the study. His worst suspicions had been confirmed, for he had now proved that the weasel had indeed been poisoned.

"It wasn't old Wythes," he said, "that's a certainty. But if I ever find out who did it, he'd better look out for himself. That's all."

The others sympathised with him, though Cuthbert had not been a lovable character. Bill had not forgotten the time when the animal had bitten him in the ear; Batty still cherished the remembrance of sharp teeth in his finger. On the principle that nothing but good must be spoken of the dead, however, they were prepared to let bygones be bygones, assisting nobly at the interment of Cuthbert behind the junior pavilion. They then inspected the two-stroke.

"Bill, I reckon you did have a bargain after all," said Batty, when he had treated the bike to a thorough examination. "It's worth fifteen quid of anybody's money. Where are you going to keep it?"

Bill had given this problem some thought, deciding in the end that Peartree Farm would be the best location for their new acquisition. Standing only a couple of miles from Bracken, it was not too far away for convenience, but just the right distance for safety from prying beaks. The fact that Feathers had used the farm as a cache for his private menagerie, paying handsomely for the privilege, should make Farmer Wythes amenable. Batty, whom his friends sometimes thought took too much on himself, gave the matter careful consideration.

"Good enough," he said at last. "We'll go up there to-morrow afternoon and fix up. Leave it to me and I'll see Wythes doesn't rook you. If Feathers had followed my advice he'd be quids in pocket now," he added, glaring at the naturalist.

"Glad you approve," murmured Bill, with an irony completely wasted on Batty.

At that moment the final event of an eventful day took place. Strolling towards them up Love Lane, which divides



“ You wouldn’t want me to starve, would you ? ”

Big Side from Little Side at Bracken, a coarse and unlovely specimen hove in sight. A mere glance was sufficient to inform Bill that here was red-face in person, checks, fat and all other embellishments complete. His manner, however, which had been so lamentably lacking in old-world courtesy during his previous encounter with Bill, now positively oozed graciousness.

"Now this is pleasant, very pleasant," he said, accosting Bill in what he evidently considered a friendly way.

Bill unhooked the huge, red finger which had grasped the lapel of his blazer.

"If it's about that accident," he said, "you can go and boil your head."

The large man laughed. It seemed, from his manner, that the little affair of the accident was forgotten, buried in the limbo of the past. Nothing was farther from his thoughts than the raking up of unpleasant memories. Everything in the garden, in fact, was lovely. With one exception.

"It's my little boy, you see," he said, mystifyingly. "This morning my wife said to me, 'Now look you here, Percy Hubbard, if you don't bring back those books to-night, you'll get no dinner.' So that's what I've come about. *You wouldn't want me to starve, would you?*"

He laughed loudly, stroking his huge stomach with hands resembling bunches of bananas.

It was Batty who tumbled to the true inwardness of the situation. He grasped the straw so fortuitously floated down the current of events thankfully enough.

"Do you mean you want to buy those books?" he asked.

It appeared that this was Mr. Percy Hubbard's supreme desire. Knowing, as he explained, that Captain Webb, of Taskers House, Great Firkin, had recently departed this life, and that his furniture and effects were for sale, Percy had wended his way thither for the purpose of purchasing the books, which he had already noted in the sale catalogue.

"My nipper, he's keen on natural history," he explained, "and as soon as I see these books in the catalogue, why, I says to myself, Percy, my boy, they're yours. Imagine my disappointment when I get to the sale too late, having been delayed on the way, as you might say, and find this young gentleman has been and bought 'em."

They could imagine his disappointment well enough;

but they were not given a chance of saying so, for Batty, as usual, took charge of the proceedings.

"How much?" he demanded briefly.

Percy looked at him sharply. He had not expected methods quite so businesslike. On his side, however, not to be outdone, the point was reached just as quickly.

"Five quid, cash."

"Done," replied Batty. "Bill, skedaddle and get the goods."

It was in any case useless for Bill to point out that legally the books were his and it was for him to say whether or not they should be sold. Batty had the bit between his teeth and that was that. Besides, Bill was too enraptured at the thought that after all the books were worth something to trouble about Batty's leadership. Within five minutes Percy Hubbard was wending his way homewards with the volumes under his arm, and Batty was thoughtfully counting through five crisp pound notes.

"A good job I was here," he said, "otherwise you'd have been robbed."

"It was, wasn't it," replied Bill, stretching out his hand. "Let me have a look at that note, will you?"

CHAPTER III

ENTER NEBUCHADNEZZAR

BATTY had disgraced himself. There was no possible, probable shadow of doubt about that, at all events in his own mind. He prided himself on the possession of various virtues and few vices. Foremost amongst the virtues was Acumen.

"Very few people keep their wits about them," he was wont to say. "I do, and look at me."

They looked at him and usually remarked that if Acumen brought about such a result they were only too glad to have been behind the door when this quality was doled out. In their heart of hearts, however, they prided themselves on Batty's wits almost as much as if they themselves had been thus endowed. And now Batty had tripped up, taken the count, been had for a mug.

It was useless for the others to commiserate, to say that anybody might have been taken in as easily. This was but cold comfort for the unhappy Batty, who, only the previous half, had waxed bitter regarding the foolishness and general half-wittedness of those who accept dud money in lieu of good, honest Bank of England notes. His downfall was thus the more complete, his cup of sorrow full to overflowing. He had been swindled, robbed, cheated; for one of the notes handed over by the execrable Percy had proved, on close examination, to be but a sorry imitation of its more worthwhile brethren.

"It can't be helped," said Sleepy cheerfully, "I should have been taken in just as easily. It's only luck that Bill spotted it."

Batty found small solace in the fact that his twin would also have been hoodwinked. Sleepy had very little Acumen. The damage, however, was done, and as they pointed out to him, the profit accruing from the deal in films was still more than worth while. 100 per cent. is not to be sneezed at in these hard times.

"It's not so much the fact that I was taken in," said Batty, a statement which did not ring true to those who knew him, "but I'd like to know where that chap got the dud from. If I'd been quick enough and discovered it before he'd sloped off, we might have done a bit of good."

Though it was he who had spotted the fake, Batty being at the time too taken up with his own cleverness in closing the deal, Bill did not argue about the matter. Being cursed by nature, however, he could not allow the implication anent Percy to pass unquestioned. Patiently he pointed out that although red-face had unpleasant features and was unlovely in every respect, this was not proof that the dud had been passed deliberately.

"As a matter of fact, I doubt it very much," said Bill, not because he did, but because he could not resist taking the opposite view. "Why pass only one, when he could have palmed off five? If you didn't notice one you wouldn't notice a whole wad."

Batty assumed a pained expression at the suggestion contained in this remark.

"All right, only you needn't rub it in. At any rate, I don't chase about the country buying up useless articles. If

Percy didn't pass that note on purpose, I'll eat my hat. It's obvious he's one of a gang. Did you ever see such a face !"

As they were never likely to set eyes on Percy again, there was only an academic interest in the argument, which was dropped by tacit consent. The important fact was that Study 6 now found its finances on an even firmer foundation, added to which the two-stroke should prove a decided acquisition. Feathers, who was rather limited in his explorations by reason of the poor train and bus services operating in rural Westmorland, had already mapped out several excursions which the bike would make possible. The others being no less averse to trying their hands at killing themselves in a novel manner, the sum of fifteen shillings was that night dispatched to the County Council with a request that three driving licences be dispatched forthwith.

It was not until five o'clock that the proposed visit to Peartree Farm could take place. Bill spent a nerve-wracking day wondering whether the two-stroke would be discovered in the shed, and concocting various stories to meet such an emergency. It was rather a pity the situation did not arise, for at least one of the tales was in its way a masterpiece. Five o'clock, however, found him astride the machine safely traversing the rutted lane which led to Peartree. At the farm he met the others, Feathers being eager to inspect his menagerie for signs of further dirty work. Having got away from Bracken rather earlier than the others, they discovered him in earnest conversation with farmer Wythes.

"But I tell you it was definitely poison," he was saying. "I opened him up myself, and I know. Unless you're going to say I don't know my own job."

Farmer Wythes, a long, thin, lantern-jawed man, seemed almost as worried as Feathers by the tragic accident which had cut Cuthbert off in the middle of a promising career.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Featherstone, but I can't understand it. I fed the animals myself, and my daughter prepared the food. It beats me."

It was with evident relief that he turned to the others and listened to Bill's proposition regarding the housing of the bike. Batty, somewhat subdued since the incident of the dud note, graciously allowed Bill to handle the affair. The farmer scratched his head when the suggestion that he should garage the two-stroke was placed before him.

"I don't know, I'm sure," he said slowly. "It's against your school rules, isn't it?"

"Yes, and so are one or two other things," said Bill quickly.

This was true enough. Farmer Wythes, ever ready to make a few odd shillings, had in the past entered into several unlawful transactions with the pupils of Bracken, always to his own advantage, be it said. Now, however, he seemed reluctant to agree to house the bike. He moved away and seemed to be thinking deeply. At length he evidently made up his mind, for he came back with a brisker step.

"All right, you can use the small lean-to down the field. It'll cost you three bob a week," he added.

Bill, who had hoped to hire accommodation for less than that, saw that Wythes was in a tricky mood and gave way.

"O.K., but you're a bit of a swindler," he said cheerfully.

Farmer Wythes grunted, leading the way to the shed, which was in fairly good repair and had a padlock on the door.

"Those who take risks have to be paid for them," he said. "Don't forget I supply the school with butter. I don't want to lose a good customer by breaking the rules."

"Not to mention the eggs," remarked Sleepy, referring to the very lucrative contract whereby Peartree supplied Parson's House with this form of nourishment.

The farmer's reply to some extent explained his irritable mood. It seemed that he had given up his poultry, the unspoken implication being that this had been under duress. Knowing Miss Elizabeth Wythes, who kept house at Peartree for her brother, Study 6 had little difficulty in deciding that this formidable lady had issued an ultimatum. In the past she had frequently interfered in her brother's management of the farm.

"Bad luck," said Bill. "Who's got the contract now?"

"Don't know, and care less," replied Wythes. "Well, there's the shed, you can take it or leave it, as you like."

They decided to take it, leaving the bike safely locked up, and returning to the farm yard in search of Feathers. They found him in the act of transferring a small pink-nosed white rat to his pocket.



He moved away, and seemed to be thinking deeply.

"Here, hold on," said Sleepy. "What do you think you're doing?"

Feathers looked up defensively. He had expected opposition, but had hoped to transfer Nebuchadnezzar to Parson's before he was called to man his guns.

"He's off his food," he said, "and I'm not running any risks. Cuthbert was poisoned, and I'm not at all sure that Neb isn't going the same way. At any rate, I'm going to be on the safe side."

In vain did they argue the point. Though the pains they took to inform him of the dire results of housing a white rat in the study were great, Feathers remained unmoved. Nebuchadnezzar, he told them, was an exceptional rat. He was clean in his habits and wished only to be friendly with all: He was, in fact, a more desirable study mate than some Feathers could mention. In proof of this Neb sat up, preened his whiskers and happily bit Bill's finger nearly to the bone. Even with this proof of his pet's cannibalistic habits, Feathers refused to climb down. Neb was henceforth to make the study's complement up to five.

It was on the way back to Bracken that they met one who, in the past, had proved a real friend to Feathers. They spotted his strolling figure some way down the lane, accompanied by the ever-faithful corpulent Brooks.

"Here's the doctor," said Bill, "want a word with him, Feathers?"

Dr. Vanstone took the decision out of their hands, for as they drew near he hailed them.

"Good afternoon. Had a good exeat, Feathers?"

They had long since grown used to the doctor's uncanny talent for recognising his friends without the use of his eyes. Now, though he peered at them through the thick lenses of his glasses, they knew that he could not see a thing. They also knew that Brooks, who attended his master everywhere, had not already told him who it was approaching. The doctor took intense delight in surprising people by recognising them, and would have been rather annoyed if Brooks had spoiled his fun.

Living in a large, Tudor house on the outskirts of the village of Bracken, Dr. Vanstone had little enough pleasure in life. A keen naturalist, the loss of his sight had handicapped him terribly, and his days were spent sightless amid

surroundings which would have delighted the heart of anybody interested in the study of wild life. It was a hard fate, and one which could not fail to rouse pity. Feathers, who had as a new boy explored the doctor's territory, and become friendly with him, had the right of way over the estate, Vanstone knowing well enough that the wild life which abounded, especially by the banks of the little stream which ran through the grounds and eventually emptied itself in Windermere, would come to no harm. Feathers was grateful for the privilege, but the doctor professed himself even more grateful.

"You are my eyes, Feathers," he used to say. "These other people can't help me much, though they do their best. But they don't see things as you see them, and as I would have seen them if my eyes had been spared. You're my eyes now."

This evening he seemed to be in a good mood. The reason was obvious with his next remark.

"Feathers, I've got some good news. I think I may be able to see again. Not much, but a little. This morning I distinctly saw a shadow move across the light. It was blurred and indefinite, but it's an omen."

He peered this way and that quickly, his thick glasses, which he wore on the instructions of the eye specialist, glinting in the evening sun. It was a pathetic sight, and his audience felt their own eyes grow strained in sympathy.

"Come up and see me as soon as you get a chance," was the doctor's farewell, when they explained that lock-up bell would ring in half an hour.

They promised to do so, for his invitations were always welcome. His house, which had at one time been part of the monastery on the site of which the school now stood, was a show place, while the grounds were glorious for eight months of the year. The river which ran through their midst was deep, opening out near the house into a natural swimming pool. Here, on summer afternoons, Study 6 often congregated to enjoy a bathe far from the madding crowd. Dr. Vanstone had proved himself a good friend, especially to Feathers, who was never tired of exploring the extensive grounds, which ran right up into the hills.

As they left him they looked back to see him still standing there, Brooks watching them out of sight.

"I'm sorry for him," said Batty slowly, as they walked down the lane, "but I can't say honestly that I like being with him. I'm too sorry for him, I suppose."

This, more or less, summed up the reactions of the others, who like most other people, felt uncomfortable in the presence of bodily affliction—and were ashamed of themselves !

"Half a minute," said Sleepy suddenly, when the first corner of the lane had been turned. "There was something I wanted to ask the doctor."

He turned back, catching them up again after some minutes. His expression was thoughtful, as the walk back to the school was continued. Batty, who knew his twin pretty well, better than he did himself perhaps, glanced sharply at him.

"What's on your mind ?" he murmured, when Bill and Feathers were out of hearing.

"Nothing."

Batty raised his eyebrows. The remark, more than anything else, proved conclusively that Sleepy had more than somewhat on the article which in his case passed for a mind. It was, however, quite useless to try to force a confidence. When he felt like being obstinate, Sleepy could give points to a mule. At some future date, no doubt, provided that he was not pressed, he would divulge whatever it was that was troubling him. Until then, Batty would have to abide in patience. When it came to it, he could be as patient as Sleepy was obstinate.

The others had by this time reached the end of the lane, where it joined the main road. When the twins caught them up, they were examining with great interest, a red and white poster which had been placed in position since they had started on the trip to Peartree.

"Well, what about it ?" enquired Bill, pointing to the large and gaudy lettering, which stated in no uncertain terms that a Colossal Fair was to be held in the Brewery Fields on July 1st.

Now, there is something about a fair which defies description, but is none the less attractive because of that. Whether it be the shouting, jostling crowd, the sideshows, the flaring naphtha lights, the coconut-shies or the fat lady, and the living skeleton, or a combination of them all, there is an

atmosphere attaching to a country fair which cannot fail to attract. Study 6 looked at each other in silence. Four minds had but a single thought, four hearts definitely beat as one. "The Man," as the headmaster of Bracken was known, would almost certainly put Brewery Fields out of bounds for the important day; beaks and prefects would be on the prowl—but Study 6 would be there.

"Good enough," said Batty. "But we shall have to work out a plan of campaign. Leave it to me."

Evidently he was well on the way to recovering his self-confidence. The problem of beating the powers of darkness, as represented by beaks and prefects, was right up his street, as the others would have been the first to admit. General Batty was taking the field, in fact.

Thus did another piece of the jigsaw puzzle, which at the moment they did not know was a puzzle, slid into place. If they had not decided to go to the fair. . . . but, then, destiny was properly on the war path and saw to it that they did as they were required. Nebuchadnezzar, who later on was to prove his worth in no uncertain fashion, took the opportunity to pop his head out of his master's pocket, and take a look at his surroundings. His expression seemed to say, "It's all right, the plans of mice and men go oft astray, but not of rats. we're rather different, you know."

CHAPTER IV

THE BIRTH OF AN IDEA

"**W**ERE going to tea with your aunt," said Batty, addressing Bill. "The day after to-morrow," he added.

The fact that Aunt Juniper had not yet invited the study to tea or any other meal, seemed to weigh very lightly with Batty. Aunt Juniper, who had already stumped up so munificently, was almost certain to ask them over to Little Orchard, her large and comfortable house near Winton Earls before long. But it was not the habit of Bill & Co. to invite themselves.

"Don't be a chump," replied Bill. "We can't go barging in like that. Besides, the fair comes off the day after to-morrow."

Batty leaned back and regarded him with pity. Under this sorrowful glare Bill grew uncomfortable.

"Well, what's the idea?" he asked.

"Perfectly simple," Batty murmured. "We go to tea with Aunt Juniper, having not the slightest difficulty in getting an exeat from Pieface. After all, you should thank her personally for the £10, you know. If, after tea, your aunt expresses a wish to go to the fair, who are we to gainsay her? At Bracken we are brought up to be gentlemen, I would remind you. It would be our obvious duty to escort her to Brewery Fields."

"Quite, and what happens if a beak spots us?" enquired Sleepy.

"Nothing at all. Brewery Fields is out of bounds, but that doesn't apply to us, having an exeat. At any rate, we can say that we thought it didn't, and it's ten to one we shall get away with it."

Study 6 had to admit that Batty had struck oil. Little Orchard being in exactly the opposite direction from Brewery Fields, and the invitation coming to Pieface—by which name was their headmaster known—direct from Aunt Juniper, there was little doubt that an exeat would be granted. Thereafter they were free to visit Aunt Juniper, and if she went to the fair, strictly and technically speaking, so could they.

"It's a cinch," said Batty calmly. "Get on with it, Bill. Better send a wire to be on the safe side. We want that exeat by first thing the day after to-morrow."

The wire duly sent, they sat back to await events. Not for a moment did they suppose that Aunt Juniper would do anything but fall in with their plans. She was a hospitable lady, who misguidedly was fond of her only nephew. She was also a sport, and though shrewd enough to see through many of their ingenious schemes, had never let them down. In this case they were not disappointed. On the morning of the fair day, Bill received a letter asking him and his friends to tea that afternoon, and Pieface received a request to allow Study 6 to travel to Little Orchard. It being a Saturday, and therefore a half-holiday, Pieface made no bones about it. He did not even mention the fair on the Brewery Fields, though it did cross his mind that with these four reprobates out of the way, there were four less to fall into temptation.

Four o'clock, therefore, found Study 6 cosily sitting round the plentiful table supplied by Aunt Juniper. For some time they devoted themselves entirely to the task in hand, which, broadly speaking, was to dispose of as much fruit and cream as possible in the time allowed by etiquette for the eating of afternoon tea. Aunt Juniper, whose appearance can best be described by saying that she was not unlike a certain famous portrait of Queen Elizabeth, surveyed the four with a certain grimness. When the repast was over, even Sleepy, who had an enormous appetite, being momentarily satisfied, she leaned her elbows on the table and spoke to the point.

"In all the time you have disgraced Bracken with your presence, Bill, you have never before invited yourself to tea. Not, of course, that I object, but naturally the urgency of your wire, which seemed to indicate that you were being reduced to starvation, has raised certain questions in my mind. Knowing you, I mean. In other words, what ulterior motive had you in view? Come on, out with it," she ended abruptly, "and no shilly-shallying."

Batty sighed. It was just like a woman to want all the whys and wherefores; not to be content with the superficial but to want to dig right down to the roots of a matter. He had a shrewd enough idea of Aunt Juniper's character, however, not even to dally with the idea of trying to lead her up the traditional path. The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth was the only formula with Aunt Juniper.

The story was therefore told in its entirety. When it was finished, the owner of Little Orchard surveyed her guests with a fearsome eye.

"Of all the impertinence I have ever heard of," she said at length, "this just about beats the band. To try and make me a tool for your ridiculous schemes is the absolute limit."

For a moment even Bill was taken in. If she was really offended the result would be catastrophic. The thought of no more teas as they had just disposed of was not to be endured. A small twinkle in her eyes, however, gave the game away.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" she demanded. "Don't you want to go to this fair?"

Half an hour later, escorted thither by Tom, the chauffeur, in the huge Daimler, Study 6 was disporting itself on Brewery Fields. Protected by the sure shield of righteousness, in the person of Aunt Juniper, they trod the turf without a qualm. And, as luck would have it, not once during the whole evening did they so much as catch a glimpse of a school cap or a beak's hat. As Batty said bitterly, if they had just chanced their arms, the whole place would have been swarming with the unfriendly powers; as it was, they strolled about unmolested. They were there, however, and that was the main thing.

At a fair, Sleepy came into his own. Smaller and more compact than his twin, he was possessed of the most amazing strength, and the eye of an expert marksman. If there was anything to be thrown at or fired at, Sleepy was the man for your money. As fairs are largely composed of such side-shows as coconut-shies, miniature ranges and Aunt Sallies, Sleepy found them demi-paradises. The owners of the side-shows, when they came to know Sleepy, were apt to pack up their stalls and decamp at the sight of his compact figure bearing down on them. Others, more aggressive, were wont to enquire in a suffering voice whether he wanted to pull the roof down over their heads. Sleepy had no such intention. He took but little interest in coconuts—which are useless things when you come down to it—and thought nothing of china dogs, packets of uneatable toffee and large, blue teddy bears. Art for the sake of art was his motto. All he wanted was to be left in peace to knock down innumerable nuts, however firmly wedged and sanded, break countless glass balls and hurl a limitless number of wooden missiles at the grinning mouths of Aunt Sallies.

The firm of Blowthwaite, Blowthwaite, Blowthwaite & Sands, who ran this particular fair, and should, by the sound of their name have been respectable solicitors, were not numbered amongst Sleepy's acquaintances. Thus, when he loomed up in front of the first coconut-shy he was greeted with courtesy and made welcome.

"I'll just have a shot," he said modestly, grasping the beloved wooden balls with fervour. The others stood round with anticipatory triumph on their faces. This, they knew, was where Bracken came into its own.

The first ball dislodged a nut, and the showman hoped

it was just luck. It was not. The second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth balls all achieved their appointed ends.

"'Ere, that's enough," grumbled the owner of the shy. "Go an' 'ave a shot somewhere else. Go an' break somebody else's bloomin' bank, sonny."

Much to the disappointment of the crowd, Sleepy obligingly moved on, to the shooting gallery, where youths and men were trying vainly to shoot down coloured balls with rifles that did everything except fire backwards. Sleepy watched them for a few moments, selected a gun whose eccentricities he had carefully noted, and proceeded to demolish three balls with three shots fired so quickly that they almost sounded like one.

Thus was his triumphal progress continued round the fair ground. Aunt Juniper, who was enjoying herself hugely, could have kissed him. Of all things she admired most was efficiency; Sleepy was certainly efficient in his particular sphere. The word of his coming preceded him, so that towards the end of the tour the owners of stalls were notably lacking in cordiality. In fact, at the last of all, a shooting gallery of more than usual pretensions, he was met with downright hostility.

"You get out of 'ere, you bloomin' Buffalo Bill," said the owner, a small, white-faced man in a tweed cap four sizes too large for him. "Go on, get movin'."

Sleepy was slow to anger. In fact, he was slow in most things—except shooting—but when roused it was a terrible job to unrouse him, so to speak. It was not so much the words of the little man that angered him now; it was his whole manner, which was peculiarly offensive. Sleepy regarded him for a few moments in silence, only the edges of his nostrils revealing to his friends that anger was bubbling up like liquid in a test-tube.

Then, with one slow, deliberate movement, he reached out a hand and pulled the little man's cap hard down over his nose, so that he danced about in absolute blackness, his head completely encased in the cap. The crowd laughed derisively, hustling nearer to see the fun. At that moment, from a tent in the rear of the gallery, a second figure appeared. He pushed his way through the crowd and addressed Sleepy.

"'Ere you, come off it."

Bill gave a gasp.



He pulled the little man's cap hard down over his nose.

"Golly, it's red-face, you chaps !"

Recognition was mutual. During his rather stormy passage towards the combatants—if they can be called that—red-face had not been in a position to identify. Now he was, and without a word he turned, making off as fast as the crowd would let him. Uncaring for the howls of abuse showered on his head as he trod on toes, jostled ribs and generally behaved like a mad elephant, he pursued his way. It was useless to try and follow him. By the time they were able to get clear of the crowd, there was no sign, sound or smell of Percy Hubbard.

"And if that doesn't prove he passed the note deliberately," said Batty, "I'll eat my hat."

They were all in agreement that Percy had shown distinct signs of nervousness. This could, they considered, be due to only one cause—a guilty conscience with regard to the dud note.

"Well, it's no good standing about talking," broke in Aunt Juniper with some force. "You'll never find him in this crowd, and if you did I don't see what you could do about it."

This was certainly true, and they shrugged their shoulders and dismissed the subject temporarily. In this they were assisted by the arrival of Miss Gough, from the Honey Pot. Miss Gough, middle-aged, vague and helpless, was by way of being a good friend to Study 6. As proprietress of the Honey Pot, a roadside tea garden not far from Bracken, she was in a position to be of the greatest assistance to their inner men, a privilege which she seemed glad of. During the past two years Bill & Co. had become very friendly with her, and Bill, at any rate, always felt a protective instinct towards her. She was so exceedingly helpless, ran her business with such lack of business capacity. Bill, of course, had such a good opinion of his own abilities that it was inevitable that he should regard Miss Gough with pitying chivalry. Lately there had been indications that nemesis was catching up with her, that the Honey Pot was ceasing to pay even the meagre dividend it had hitherto provided for its owner.

To-day Miss Gough seemed even more depressed than usual. She greeted the boys sadly.

"I thought I'd come and take my mind off my worries," she said, glancing at the crowds surging past with very little

animation. She looked pale and woebegone. After a while Bill broke away from Batty and the others and walked along beside her.

"Any special worry?" he asked.

"I ought not to trouble you with it," she said, "but if I don't talk to somebody about it I shall burst."

She tucked a stray piece of hair back into place, at the same time dislodging a second tress.

"It's the Honey Pot," she continued. "I shall have to give it up, I'm afraid."

"I say, that's bad luck. Have you got to?"

Miss Gough turned a distraught face to him.

"I just can't make it pay, Bill. I know I shouldn't talk about it, but I'm past caring. It's been going down for a long time, but I hoped it would pick up again. But it hasn't. I expect I'm a bad manager. This is the best month of the year, you know, but I'm still losing money fast. I hate the thought of going, and I don't know what I shall do, but I just can't go on losing capital like this."

Bill felt intensely sorry for her. It would be a blow to Study 6, too, for they had been in the habit of teaing at the Honey Pot at least once a week and having the run of the place; but it was not of this loss that he was thinking. He felt a masculine contempt for Miss Gough's inefficiency, allied to a desire to help her. Only this was not exactly easy.

By this time they had wandered out of the fair ground proper, and had arrived in a small field round which were ranged hundreds of wooden coops and wire-netted runs. Rugged looking farmers were inspecting the occupants of the coops, which turned out to be chickens. The local farmer's association were running a show in conjunction with the fair. Bill and Miss Gough halted and stared at the bored looking poultry without really seeing them. Until gradually, over Bill's face spread the expression so well known by his friends. Inspiration had smitten him.

It was half an hour later that he rejoined the rest of the party. During that time he had been making certain enquiries and thinking extremely hard. If he had used one quarter of the energy in working for the scholarship he was supposed to be taking in a year's time, he would have made success assured. Bill, however, had other more important matters on his mind.

Miss Gough had departed to the Honey Pot, but not before Bill had held earnest conversation with her.

"Don't do anything rash yet," he had said. "I've got an idea that might help you."

It says much for his persuasive powers, and the self-confidence he possessed, that Miss Gough had nodded.

"All right, Bill, but I'm afraid it's no use. I shan't send in my notice for another month, anyway. You don't really think you can help, do you?"

Bill looked at her distraught face and nodded grandly.

"I think so," he said, "I rather think so."

When he rejoined the others he found that Feathers was fully occupied in looking after Nebuchadnezzar, who was finding the noise of the fair—as heard through his master's coat pocket—almost more than he could bear. Neb had settled down well enough in his new surroundings in Study 6, and up to the time of going to press had not been discovered by the authorities. The others were bound to admit that Feathers had a way with the animal, who obeyed his slightest word. Far from being unclean, his habits were rather better than those of the other occupants of the study, though this they could hardly be expected to admit. They did admit, however, that the rat could be amusing, especially when he sat upon the table preening his whiskers, watching them with eyes that appeared intensely wise. His permanent quarters were in the large cupboard, a shelf of which had been cleared, but he spent a large amount of his time in his master's pocket, where he would recline perfectly quiet. It was as if he knew what dire results would descend on his head and that of Feathers if he so much as moved a muscle.

Batty was preoccupied, and as a matter of fact, was still thinking about Mr. Percy Hubbard. Allowing his great brain to revolve round the problem, he presently came to a conclusion which he would presently impart to the others. In due time, also, this was to prove a most important piece in the puzzle building up around them. Aunt Juniper and Sleepy alone of the party seemed to be enjoying the fair, the former edging on Sleepy to try his hand at the sideshows once more. Engrossed as they all were, however, they did not miss the expression on Bill's face. They knew it too well !

"Hello, what's on your mind?" demanded Batty. "Another crack-brained scheme?"

Bill frowned thoughtfully. He had not yet worked out all the details of the magnificent plan which had assailed him, and was not yet ready to impart it to a sceptical audience.

"Wait and see," he replied mysteriously.

Batty slowly turned his gaze on Sleepy, and thence glanced at Feathers. All three looked grim. Bill was up to something, and they wanted to know what it was.

"Now look here, don't try and be funny," threatened Sleepy. "What stunt have you got on now?"

"I shall have it worked out by to-morrow," replied Bill. "I'll shoot the works when I'm ready, and not before. You'll just have to have patience, my children."

They had little enough of this commodity, but against sheer obstinacy could make no headway. They left the fair, however, somewhat perturbed. They never knew, with Bill, where his schemes were going to lead them. There was nothing for it, however, but to wait upon events, which they did with ill grace.

CHAPTER V

BILL LENDS A HAND

BILL sat huddled over the study table, which was littered with small pieces of paper. His hair was rumpled, his collar askew; but in his eye was that fanatical light so feared and dreaded by his friends. Bill, in fact, was in the throes of calculation. He stared at the opposite wall blankly; chewed his pencil; uttered strange sounds. Nebuchadnezzar, watching him with speculative eyes, preened his whiskers unperturbed.

It is probable that if any of his little playmates had been privileged to see Bill in his present state they would, without pity, have thrown him into the nearest standing water. This was about the only way of preventing him from persuading them to assist in the hair-brained scheme he was now busily engaged in elaborating. Fortunately for Bill, Feathers was up at the doctor's, Batty was umpiring a junior game, and Sleepy was firing at the range. Bill, therefore, was unrestric-

ted except for Neb, whose placid gaze presently got on his nerves.

"Here, it's time for your afternoon nap," he remarked, making a grab for the animal.

"You're telling me!" replied Neb, moving back just in time.

"Now you come here, or it will be the worse for you," Bill muttered, making another grab.

"Funny man!" said Neb, keeping out of harm's way.

Thereupon, Bill lost his temper and threw a book at Neb's head, a proceeding which delighted the animal to such an extent that he executed a war dance along the mantelpiece. Then, judging that he had raised Bill's temperature far enough above normal to be dangerous, he disappeared. This little trick had been played before, and though each member of the study had tried all they knew to discover Neb's secret hideout, they had all failed. Somewhere in the room there must be a hole large enough to accommodate the rat; where it was remained a mystery—to everybody but Neb.

Bill glared malevolently round, shrugged his shoulders as if he did not care tuppence where the beast was—just in case Neb was watching him—and returned to his task. The exercise had cleared his brain, for within a few moments his calculations were worked out to his satisfaction. Clearing the table, he proceeded to tear up the various scraps of paper upon which his illegible figures were scrawled, made a fair copy of the final result, placed this carefully in his pocket and left the study. On his way he passed Sleepy, returning from the range. Sleepy glared at him suspiciously. Bill was whistling a gay tune; on his face was that sublime look which only visited it when he was contemplating some scheme of more than usual audacity. Sleepy shook his head mournfully and passed on.

Bill, proceeding on his merry way, eventually reached the Black Hole of Calcutta. Here, in the depths of odorous stuffiness, he found Tom the boot-boy. Tom was a sort of relaying wireless station. Not a scrap of news but he knew all about it; not an item of interest but he was willing to pass it on—for a consideration.

"Tom, who do we get our eggs from now?" enquired Bill, coming straight to the point.

"Dunno," replied Tom briefly.

"It's worth a shilling," remarked Bill, flicking a coin in the air.

"That's different. Why didn't you say so at once?"

Tom spat on his hands, a habit he made no attempt to cure himself of, and glared at Bill as if that worthy had violated a strict rule of etiquette.

"That Trant ain't fixed nothing up yet," he added. "'E's thinking of going up to Beckworth."

"But he hasn't yet?"

"No, too lazy like, I reckon."

Bill handed over the shilling, patted Tom on the head, a proceeding which did not call forth very much appreciation, and departed even more blithely than he had entered. Things were going well.

His next call was upon Trant, Parson's House butler. Between him and Tom there was no love lost, as will have been gathered, but there rarely is much comradeship between upper and lower servants. Tom was lower, and Trant was very definitely upper. He was so like the traditional film butler that it was a standing wonder why he continued to serve Parson's when he could have been earning a fortune in Hollywood. Long, thin, grey and dignified, he now turned a majestic eye on Bill.

"Yes, Mr. Maxwell? And what may I have the pleasure of doing for you?"

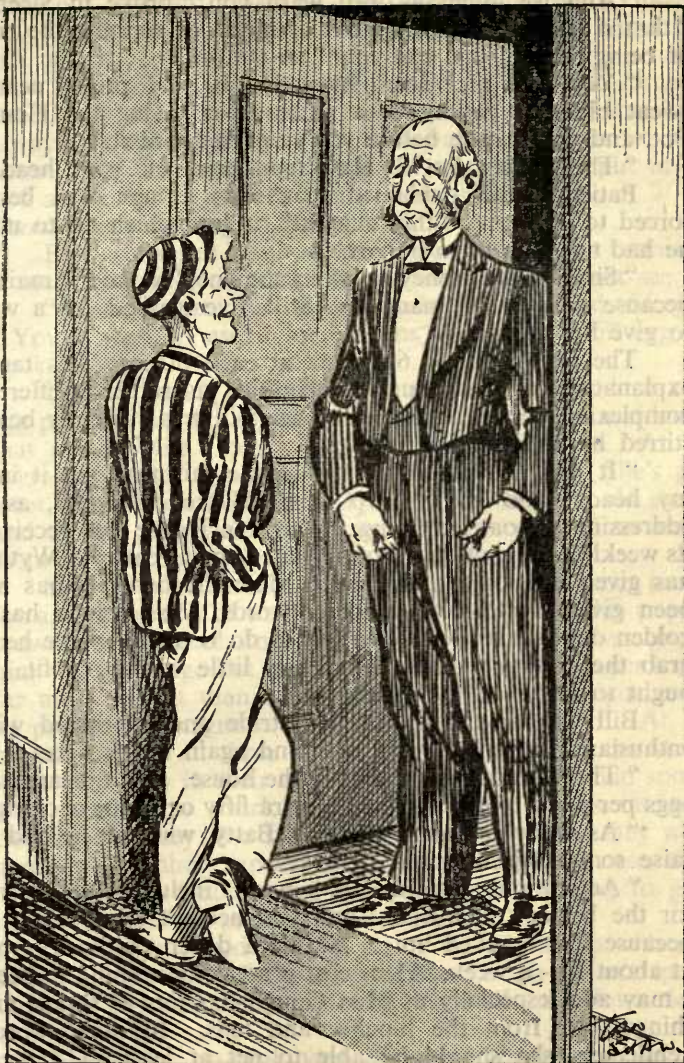
"Eggs," said Bill briefly. "It's all right," he added, "I'm not drunk. Now, I've got a proposition to put before you, Trant. There's no need to look worried, you know me."

"Yes, I know you, sir," replied Trant with pregnant meaning. "Perhaps you'd better sit down, sir," he added.

Bill sat down and began to talk. Trant listened with grave respect. At the end of fifteen minutes, Bill was still talking and Trant was still listening. A Hoover salesman could not have done better.

Consumed as they were by curiosity, not unmixed with apprehension, Study 6 had to bide patiently until tea was over before they could corner Bill and wring the truth out of him. Safely in the study, with the door locked, they surrounded Bill grimly.

"Now then, we'll have the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth," said Batty threateningly. "What's the scheme?"



"Yes, Mr. Maxwell, and what may I have the pleasure of doing for you?"

"All right, give me a chance," said Bill.

"And we might as well warn you," broke in Sleepy, "that if it means breaking out at night, or running the risk of being sacked, you can count us out."

"You're a nice lot," snorted Bill. "I pretty nearly sweat blood to work out a scheme for saving the Honey Pot, and you grouse before you've even heard it."

"The Honey Pot?" Have you gone off your head?"

Patiently Bill explained that Miss Gough was being forced to evacuate within a month, a fact which up to now he had not seen fit to impart.

"She's losing money all along the line," he said, "mainly because she's a bad manager. Still, I've worked out a way to give her a hand."

The rest of Study 6 looked at each other. This tardy explanation of Miss Gough's difficulties put rather a different complexion on the affair. For once Bill was evidently being stirred by an unselfish motive.

"It was the farmer's show at the fair that put it into my head," said Bill. "Up to now," he continued, as if addressing a board meeting, "Parson's House has received its weekly supply of eggs from Wythes up at Peartree. Wythes has given up poultry, and up to date the contract has not been given elsewhere. In other words, Miss Gough has a golden opportunity. All she has to do is to buy some hens, grab the contract and make a nice little weekly profit. It ought to make all the difference."

Bill was now well into his stride and continued with enthusiasm, referring every now and again to his notes.

"There are seventy chaps in the house. That means 140 eggs per week required, plus an extra fifty or so for cooking."

"As many as that?" enquired Batty, who felt he had to raise some objections.

"Actually they need 250 a week, including the meals for the beaks," said Bill, "and you needn't argue about it because I've checked up. At 1/6 a dozen that works out at about 30/- a week. Hens cost practically nothing to keep, I may add, especially as Miss Gough has lots of scraps and things over from the lunches and teas. In other words, gentlemen, she should be able to net at least £1 a week profit for the outlay of a little capital."

Study 6 looked at each other. It seemed that Bill had

actually hit on a brainwave. £1 a week was not a large sum, but it might make all the difference to Miss Gough.

"Just a minute," said Feathers, "how do you know she can get the contract?"

"No trouble about that," replied Bill. "I've already fixed it up with Trant. You know as well as I do that he's always looked after the eggs and butter supplies for the house. I've promised him that the eggs will be put in at 1/6 a dozen. If he sells them to the housekeeper at 2/- a dozen, that's nothing to do with us."

Batty shrugged his shoulders. There was almost certainly a snag somewhere, but at the moment he could not see it.

"How about the initial outlay?" enquired Sleepy. "You'd need an awful lot of hens to produce 250 eggs a week."

"Good hens," replied Bill patronisingly, "produce one egg per hen per day in the summer. Allowing for accidents, that means Miss Gough will need about 40 birds. At an average price of 7/- each that works out at £14. She's got a lot of room up there at the Honey Pot and some old sheds and things. She won't need more than another £5 to make them into decent runs. Call it £20 outlay."

Study 6 were bound to admit that £1 a week net profit for an outlay of £20 was not bad. Bill produced his papers crowded with calculations and they grouped themselves round him. It is strange but undeniable that figures on paper carry far more weight than when spoken. The black signs seem to produce a magnetic force compelling attention. At all events, though all three of the saner members of the study were quite sure in their innermost hearts that Bill had somewhere, somehow overlooked a vital point in his intricate calculations, they also knew, just as certainly, that they were going to lend their support to the scheme. In any case, they all liked Miss Gough, and were more than willing to give her a hand in her present difficulties.

"All right," said Batty at last, "we'll come up with you to the Honey Pot. Only I hope Miss Gough doesn't spend the cash and then find the beastly birds all drop down dead or something."

There was no real need to obtain the support of the other members of the study, but Bill always set out to obtain their assistance if possible. He then felt safer, for Study 6

worked on the cabinet principle of shared responsibility once they had all sanctioned any particular move.

"Good enough," he now said briskly. "There's just time to get to the Honey Pot before lock-up. That is, I've just got time. I've got the bike hidden away on the lower ground."

"I'll come with you on the pillion," said Batty. "I don't know that I trust you, my lad."

Bill, however, evidently had concealed nothing, for he made no objection, and they were presently on their way to the Honey Pot, situated next door to Peartree. They had successfully eluded observation as they pushed the bike out of the shed on the lower ground and rode away.

They found Miss Gough at liberty, the few customers she had served during the afternoon having gone. She listened rather vaguely to Bill's impassioned plea that she should branch out into poultry keeping. Having thought up the scheme he was as eager for her to adopt it as if his own income was at stake. Batty was surprised that more opposition was not encountered.

"Well, if you think it would be a good idea," she said at last, "and if I really can get the contract, I suppose it might help. I have got the space, haven't I?"

"Of course, it means spending about £20," said Bill delicately, feeling some embarrassment at this crude mention of money.

Miss Gough shrugged her shoulders. It seemed that she could produce this amount, and probably on the principle that she might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb, that having lost money another £20 would not make much difference, intimated that she was prepared to disburse this amount. Before Bill and Batty left arrangements had all been made. Having taken details at the farmer's show, Bill knew exactly where to purchase the birds, and a chat with William, Miss Gough's odd job man, proved that he was capable of converting the idle sheds into runs. Within a week the new poultry farm should be running.

"And thank you so much, Bill," said Miss Gough as the motor-bike was started up. "I really am grateful. You see, if I could keep going for a little things might be all right. I know it's a horrid thing to say, but Aunt Lizzie

is nearly ninety, and she can't be getting much out of life. When she dies I come in for her money."

They had heard of Miss Gough's aunt before. An objectionable old woman by all accounts, she had consistently refused to help her niece, though she had intimated that she was leaving her provided for in her will. Bill, not quite sure whether he ought to express the hope that Aunt Lizzie would soon leave this vale of woe and tears or not, said nothing.

On the way back to Bracken, Batty expressed himself forcibly. Bill had persuaded Study 6 to lend its countenance to the poultry scheme, and had presumably infused Miss Gough with confidence in it. Batty hoped devoutly that it would work out satisfactorily. He had suddenly realised that there were certain parts of Bill's calculations which might not pan out. Would each hen lay an egg a day, for example? He hoped so, but it seemed a tall order. Batty had an uneasy feeling that perhaps he had not gone into the scheme carefully enough. It was too late to back out now, however.

"If anything goes wrong," he said to Bill, "anything at all, just look out for yourself, my boy!"

CHAPTER VI

BY THE RIVER

"I'VE been thinking," said Batty, reclining at his ease in the only respectable chair possessed by Study 6.

The other three occupants took singularly little notice of this remark. Feathers was engaged in feeding Nebuchadnezzar; Sleepy was gazing into nothing; Bill was wearing the worried frown which, since the great scheme to save the Honey Pot had been launched, had not often left his brow. He was discovering that the making of money in this wicked world is not much fun; and that the assisting of lame dogs over stiles brings with it a great deal of nervous anxiety. What with running backwards and forwards from Bracken to the Honey Pot, to discover whether the hens were doing their stuff, life was hardly worth living. Allied to which worry was the undeniable fact that his friends persisted in regarding him with threatening looks, for Batty was not the only one who had, when it was too late, wondered whether they had

been too hasty in accepting equal responsibility for the scheme. It is all very well to lose your own money, they had decided, but it is rotten to lose other people's.

One other thing Bill had discovered—that it is all very well to work out complicated statistics to prove the soundness of a stunt, but no earthly use shoving the results in front of a hen's eyes and demanding that she shall lay to that standard. When the first day of laying had brought only five eggs, Bill had torn his hair. When the second joined the procession of the centuries with but four more to its credit, he had decided that death was the only honourable refuge. Temporarily delaying this drastic procedure, however, he had felt better on the third day when the report from the Honey Pot had shown a marked improvement. He was now awaiting the fourth report, which Miss Gough had promised to send along, having to come into Bracken to shop during the early evening. It was not, therefore, to be wondered at that Bill paid scant attention to Batty's ponderous statement.

"I've been thinking," repeated the bespectacled one, in a voice loud enough to wrench the attention of the others from their various occupations.

"That must have been nice for you," said Bill automatically.

Batty took no notice of this weak attempt at humour.

"It's about Percy," he continued. "When he passed that dud note off on us I said that I thought he'd done it on purpose. That statement I am now prepared to rescind."

"How nice of you," murmured Bill. "I told you at the time that if he'd been a crook he'd have passed all five."

"Nevertheless," said Batty, using a word he loved, "there can now be no doubt at all that Percy is a crook."

He had now achieved his object—the other three were listening. They might pull Batty's leg, but they nevertheless—to use Batty's word—respected his brains.

"It's quite simple to work out," he added. "He didn't pass that dud note on purpose, that's pretty certain, because as Bill says, he'd have passed five while he was at it. But it's obvious he's a crook, or otherwise why did he sheer off like that when he saw us at the fair? And what's more, it's a dead cert. that his line is either passing or making dud notes, or both."

Feathers looked up, chewing his finger meditatively.

"Why? He might be a burglar for all we know."

"As well as a counterfeiter," said Batty quickly. "Look here, ask yourselves. He only had dealings with us on one occasion, when he bought the books. He came into contact with Bill earlier than that, but he couldn't have had the wind up over the accident because if he had he wouldn't have approached us in the lane that night. Therefore, whatever had scared him must have happened when he bought the books. Seeing that he passed a dud note off on us then, that must be the reason. In other words, he passed the note by mistake, discovered what he'd done afterwards, and got scared when he saw us at the fair. That means he knew he had a dud note on him, and in turn that means that he's in with a gang of forgers or else does the dirty work himself."

After this lengthy speech Batty leaned back and surveyed his companions keenly. He undoubtedly fancied himself in the rôle of the hawk-eyed detective; in fact, the effort of making his eyes even more like those of the bird in question forced him presently to take off his spectacles and wipe them.

"I shouldn't be surprised if you're not right," said Sleepy slowly. "But what then? Are you going to the police?"

"No, I'm not," replied Batty. "The police are blunderers."

"Act I, Scene 2, '*Hawkshaw Sees It Through*,'" murmured Feathers.

"I should go to the police if I were you," said Bill malevolently. "They'll probably lock you up as a dangerous character, and that will be all to the good."

As he spoke, the door opened, a diminutive person, one Piper minor, entered and presented to a white-faced Bill a dirty scrap of paper. Bill took it with shaking fingers; it contained the news for which he had been waiting. Before he opened the note he glanced disparagingly at the others, as much as to say, "Oh, well, it's not my fault if things have gone wrong."

The others, however, were not impressed. Batty glared steadily through his spectacles; Feathers abandoned his work with Neb; Sleepy withdrew his gaze from the wall and fastened it on Bill. In all three pairs of eyes there was but a single expression—a grim determination to mete out justice if the so-called laying hens had once more failed to come up to scratch. Bill swallowed once and opened the note.

Then he raised his eyes, blinked rapidly, peered at the paper again, and finally spoke.

"Thirty-eight," he said slowly. "Thirty-eight!"

"And a good job for you," responded Batty, a reaction which Bill found disappointing. After all, the hens, after only four days, were laying well up to standard, and if they continued at the same rate, would undoubtedly provide Miss Gough with an income. Batty was showing an extremely uncouth spirit in Bill's opinion. He did not allow this reception of the news to damp his own spirits, however. These had risen remarkably in the space of a few seconds. He was showing every symptom of becoming unbearable, in fact. Study 6 put up with his eulogising for five minutes and then called a halt.

"All right," said Sleepy at last, "it's come off. And now let's get back to something really important."

"Gosh, are you still worrying about Percy?" demanded Bill, to whom a little matter of a dud note was as chicken-feed—an appropriate simile—compared with the really important fact that his own scheme was on the road to success.

Batty, however, refused to be put off. Percy, he maintained, was beyond all reasonable doubt mixed up in dirty work at the cross-roads — or wherever else the counterfeit notes were printed. For all they knew he might be the great white chief of the organisation; but at any rate he was connected with it. To the objection that it was extremely unlikely that such an organisation existed except in Batty's fertile imagination, and that if the execrable Percy were in the habit of passing dud notes, he was in business on his own, Batty produced a battered copy of the *Westmorland News*.

"Have a look at that," he said fiercely, pointing to a column headed "Police Seek Forgers."

Having digested the report, which stated that a large number of counterfeit notes had been put into circulation in Cumberland and Westmorland, and that the police were busy tracking down the criminals, the rest of Study 6 had to admit that Batty might be right. The report put rather a different complexion on Percy and his doings.

"Look here, we ought to tell the police what we know," said Feathers. "It might be useful."

"What we know! What we guess, you mean, or rather, what this idiot guesses," broke in Bill, who was still feeling

sore at his summary treatment over the success of the hens.

"Circumstantial evidence has often hanged a man," said Sleepy, though he was not quite sure what bearing this statement had on the problem.

As a matter of fact, they were all three convinced that they had tumbled on something really important. Even Bill felt that Batty had struck oil. In the end it was decided that Batty ought to be delegated to interview the authorities, as represented by the corpulent Sergeant Huthwaite, who was responsible for the maintenance of law and order in the village of Bracken.

"You'll probably get a medal for it," said Bill sarcastically.

The next day being a half, and no matches claiming the attention of Study 6, Batty betook himself to Bracken village immediately after lunch. With him went Sleepy, who mooched along the lane in a day-dream. Batty surveyed his twin furtively, at last breaking a lengthy silence. He had waited patiently for the idiot to unburden himself of whatever was on his mind, but his forbearance had now reached its limit.

"Come on, tell your uncle," he said briefly. "What's biting you?"

Sleepy looked up quickly.

"Sorry, I can't tell you yet. It's just an idea, that's all. I'm turning up here, by the way."

Without a further explanation he turned up the narrow path that led up the west bank of the river, leaving his twin staring after him in exasperation.

"Fool," he muttered, turning away. He was beaten, knew it and did not like it.

Sleepy, in the meantime, wandered on up the path that led towards Vanstone's house, frowning heavily. Batty could call him obstinate if he liked, but he was hanged if he was going to talk before he felt like it. There was probably nothing in his idea anyway; if not, then the longer he kept quiet, the better; if by any chance he should be right in his suspicion, then there was still no point in shouting his head off—yet.

Half-way along the path, where it crossed the river by means of a narrow bridge, he met Feathers, complete with a ciné-camera over his shoulder.

"That's right," said the naturalist bitterly. "Come clod-

hopping along like a steam-roller. I've been waiting here nearly an hour trying to get a shot of that kingfisher, and just when the blinking bird has decided to behave itself, you come along and scare him off again. You're a rotter," he added with some force.

Sleepy, who was well used to the habits and manners of Feathers when in search of wild life, said nothing. He stared into the water and shrugged his shoulders. Feathers looked at him sharply, even his present task not preventing him from realising that the usually placid Sleepy was worried.

"Here, come down under this bush," he said, "and for goodness sake keep quiet."

Thus, destiny having pulled the strings as efficiently as usual, Feathers and Sleepy were presently ensconced in the one place in the whole of Westmorland, or for that matter in the whole of England, most suited to destiny's purpose. They had been under the shelter of the bush for some ten minutes, perfectly silent, when voices suddenly broke the afternoon calm. They proceeded from the bridge almost immediately above them.

"Well, Higgins, what about it?" demanded one voice. "Dragging me all the way down here," it added venomously. "As if I haven't got something better to do."

"Now don't you take on so," replied the second voice, in a thin, high-pitched whine. "I've got me orders and so 'ave you. That's all there is to it."

So suddenly had the conversation started, the footsteps of the two men having been deadened by the soft earth of the river path, that for a few seconds both Sleepy and Feathers were too startled to move. Then, just when Feathers was about to break cover and ask the speakers whether it would be too much trouble to continue their loud conversation somewhere else, Sleepy put out a large hand to restrain him. Sleepy badly wanted to remain in hiding. He did not quite know why, but something whispered to him that it might be a good idea. Especially as Farmer Wythes was one of the speakers on the bridge.

"All right," said Wythes, in answer to the last remark, "only get a move on, I'm a busy man."

"I was told to say that the birds would be coming tomorrow night late, that's all."

"Oh, they will, will they? What time?"



"Well, Higgins, what about it?" demanded one voice.

"Dunno, but after dark, that's a certainty."

Farmer Wythes grunted, shifting his position on the bridge.

"All right, I'll be ready for them. But it's a risky business."

"But well paid, don't forget that. It's well paid."

After that, without even a farewell, the two men parted company, Wythes returning to the west bank, the other man to the east. Cautiously parting the leaves of the bush, Sleepy peered out. He caught a glimpse of a thin, undersized little man hurrying away along the path.

"What's the idea?" asked Feathers, scrambling from cover.

"I don't quite know," replied Sleepy, "but it's rather interesting, don't you think?"

But Feathers was already packing up his ciné-camera.

"Fat lot of good waiting here any longer," he said morosely.

CHAPTER VII

ROBBERY WITH VIOLENCE

IT was an education to accompany Feathers on the trail. Invitations to this end were very rare, for the naturalist knew from bitter experience how an unskilled companion may ruin an entire expedition. When circumstances conspired to permit a joint excursion, however, the companion—whatever it might be—learned more of woodcraft and the lore of the wild in a couple of hours than in any other way he could have assimilated in as many years. What did Feathers not know about the Westmorland countryside and its furred and feathered inhabitants? He knew where the ravens nested and where the carrion crows laid their green eggs; he had followed the water-ousel to its lair and seen the young hatch out; he had obtained ciné films of red grouse fighting, of the dottrel winging homewards, of the curlew flying high. And once, on a never-to-be-forgotten occasion, he had filmed a kestrel swooping to its prey. No, there was very little Feathers did not know concerning the natural history of the Bracken district.

This afternoon, when he had somewhat recovered from the effects of the disappointment regarding the kingfisher, he made a rare suggestion. On Bracken Fell, a great hummock of grey rock a couple of miles from the school, dwelt ravens, nesting on the ledges which overhung a sheer drop of thousands of feet. It was Feathers' determination to secure the last of a series of films portraying the life and habits of this bird, and seeing that Fate had forced on him the company of Sleepy, he decided to put that circumstance to some use. The climb to the ledges on Bracken Fell was not easy; a companion would more than earn his keep for once. A helping hand would certainly come in useful, and Sleepy, being possessed of more than usual strength, was the man for Feathers' money.

"I don't mind," replied the strong man, when the suggestion was put up to him.

He trudged alongside his companion almost in silence, so that even Feathers, who usually preferred silence to talk, was constrained to wonder what had come over him. However, he said nothing, but concentrated on planning the route to his objective. Sleepy evidently had something on his conscience, but the mind of Feathers was a simple and once-track organism. To the task in hand he bent all his energies.

The result of this concentration was excellent, for he was able to obtain what, even in his exacting judgment, was a super film. Sleepy proved his worth, on one occasion saving the precious cine camera from certain destruction by catching it as it slipped from its owner's grasp on a particularly precipitous slope. At the end of the trip, when they stood once more under the Fell, the work completed, Feathers more or less said, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

Bracken Fell being fairly close to Dr. Vanstone's house, and the time being conveniently near that at which healthy adults partake of afternoon refreshment, Feathers suggested a call. They therefore wended their way to the old Tudor house, Feathers on the way catching sight of the elusive kingfisher and actually taking fifteen foot of film with which he was well satisfied. They arrived at the doctor's to find that they were expected, Brooks the manservant cum companion, having sighted them approaching up the valley.

Tea, complete with raspberries and cream, was laid ready on the veranda overlooking the lawns.

"This is a bit of all right," murmured Feathers, leaning back contentedly.

"Tell me what you've been doing this afternoon," said Vanstone, turning his thick glasses towards Feathers.

Briefly the naturalist recounted the afternoon's adventures, though he left out the mysterious conversation on the bridge.

"And that reminds me," continued Feathers, "I've got those notes you wanted."

He had promised the doctor some notes he had made some time before on the habits and haunts of the dottrel. From his pocket he now produced a shabby notebook and flicked over the pages. With amazement he found himself staring not at his familiar and almost illegible handwriting, but at several newspaper cuttings pasted to the pages of the notebook.

"Well I'm hanged! Where on earth did this come from?"

Sleepy stretched out a hand and examined the book, while Feathers searched his own pockets again and presently drew forth the genuine article, which contained his own nature notes.

"I've seen this before," said Sleepy, staring at the other little book. "I remember now, it was one of the books Bill bought at the sale. He must have forgotten to give it to Percy with the rest of the junk," he added.

"This sounds very mysterious," broke in Vanstone. "I hope you haven't lost the notes, Feathers?"

"No, I've got them here. I suppose I must have put the other book in my pocket by mistake, as they're so alike, and then forgotten about it."

He went on to explain the circumstances of Bill's purchase of the books at the Great Firkin sale, and of their subsequent resale to Percy Hubbard.

"Bill seems to have swindled him," he added, "because he was supposed to have sold all the books. I suppose this one was overlooked because it's so small. Still, it doesn't matter much, because Percy swindled us much more by passing a dud note."

"Dear, dear," said Vanstone, turning to Brooks, who as

usual stood by his master's chair. "We seem to be embroiled in criminal activities, Brooks. Dud notes being passed!"

Sleepy now took a hand in the conversation, explaining how Percy had passed the note and how they had later seen him again at the fair. Vanstone listened attentively, voicing the opinion that the police should be informed.

"We've looked after that, sir," replied Sleepy. "Batty is on his way now. In fact, I suppose he's spilled the beans already."

The doctor seemed to lose interest in the story after this, turning to Feathers and chatting about the habits of the dottrel.

"I think Brooks had better copy the notes from my dictation," said Feathers, "because my writing isn't terribly good, I'm afraid."

This was no exaggeration, and Brooks obligingly copied down the notes so that later he could read them out to his blind master. The manservant appeared to be very interested in the counterfeiting story, and asked several questions about Percy Hubbard. It was something to have secured his attention, for he was a silent, reserved individual who habitually had an air of calm about him. It was difficult to imagine anything startling Brooks. Now, however, he seemed definitely intrigued.

"Very interesting, sir," he said. "I am a great reader of detective stories, and what you have told me reminds me strongly of the book entitled *Blood Money*. Perhaps you have read it?"

Both Feathers and Sleepy had to admit that this masterpiece had escaped their attention, and presently made their adieus.

"Come again sometime," said the doctor, "and thanks for the notes, by the way. You have them safe now?"

"I've got them," said Sleepy, who had picked up both the books after tea. "Here you are."

He handed the notebook to Feathers, who placed it carefully in his pocket. They then departed hoping to be in time for yet another tea in the study.

They were not destined, however, to reach the school in time for tea. An extraordinary adventure was awaiting them in the person of a beetle-browed, sinister gentleman known to his companions as Butcher and to the authorities on

Dartmoor as No. 876. This large and repulsive person who, we have it on good authority, would willingly have murdered his grandmother for fourpence, was lurking unperceived behind a large bush near the river. He took up his position some few minutes before Feathers and Sleepy hove into sight. Breathing heavily, Butcher peered through the leaves, fondling the while a short, heavy stick known professionally as a cosh.

If Feathers had been on the trail, he would no doubt have noticed the slight movement amongst the leaves of the bush as it came into sight. He would not, of course, have mistaken Butcher for a kingfisher or even for a water-ousel, but the odds are that he would have been on his guard. Butcher had the sort of countenance that would put anybody on their guard. As it was, he was well satisfied with the events of the afternoon and was now relaxing. He gave Butcher's sanctuary not a single glance.

"Ah, jest a minute," growled Butcher, pushing aside the foliage and advancing on the two boys. "Jest a minute," he repeated, dangling his cosh to give emphasis to the remark.

"Hullo, where did this come from," demanded Sleepy of the air.

"Are yer coming clean or do I 'ave to make yer?" asked Butcher, breathing heavily through his nose.

"Mad do you think?" enquired Sleepy, turning to Feathers.

The next minute he found himself reclining on the ground staring up at a blue sky which was partially blocked out by Butcher's large, beery face. Struggling to rise he found it impossible by reason of a large, nailed boot placed firmly on his chest. He was just deciding to let his teeth sink into the ankle—an unpleasant proceeding but one justified in the circumstances—when Butcher extracted his hand from Sleepy's blazer, clasping fondly a small and shabby leather book. Taking no more than a second to give vent to his satisfaction, which he did by growling horribly and showing his teeth, he then tapped Sleepy on the head with his cosh. It was a skilful, professional tap, under which Sleepy relapsed into unconsciousness.

There are some who, having hit a man or boy on the head with a stick and seen the victim fall back senseless, would wonder for a horrid minute whether the blow had



“ Are yer coming clean, or do I ’ave to make yer ? ”

perhaps been too hard ; whether recovery would take place. But not Butcher. He could have told you, had you asked him, that Sleepy would be unconscious for exactly ninety seconds ; that Feathers, who had been dealt with similarly some sixty seconds previously, would recover at about the same time, the blow which had fallen to his share having been just a little harder. In other words, Butcher was an artist who knew his stuff. So well, in fact, that both Feathers and Sleepy came slowly back to this world more or less to the second estimated, to find themselves deserted and alone. Their assailant had vanished even as the snows of winter—or the roses of summer—leaving but a fragrant memory behind him.

It was Feathers who staggered to his feet first. He was joined a few moments later by Sleepy, who had a hard head and was little the worse for his experience. Feathers himself soon had something else to think about besides his aching head. When Sleepy informed him that Butcher had stolen the little book, the naturalist's first thought was that Providence was on his side ; that by a miracle the volume bought at the sale had been taken. Sleepy, however, had the task of disabusing his mind of this consolation.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I must have made a mistake. Instead of giving you the notes I must have given you the other book. I'm afraid the chap got away with the notes."

Feverishly Feathers hunted through his pockets in the vain hope that Sleepy had made a mistake. This was dashed to the ground by the discovery, in his own pocket, of the useless scrap book bought by Bill at the sale. Like a fool, Sleepy had repeated the original mistake and mixed the books up. And yet, had he but known it, it was fortunate that Butcher had got away with the wrong book, for thereby another piece of the jigsaw was later to fall into place. At the time, however, Feathers knew nothing of this. He groaned in spirit.

"My notes," he muttered in helpless anger, "my notes ! Gosh, what a rotter !"

CHAPTER VIII

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS

IF Sleepy had returned to Bracken alone with his extraordinary story of highway robbery, it is more than probable

that he would not have been believed. After all, such occurrences are rare in England—especially when the motive for robbery is as trivial as a small notebook containing information regarding the habits of the dottrel. Sleepy, however, did not return alone. The corroborative evidence of Feathers made it impossible for Bill and Batty to do anything but accept the yarn. Feathers was, like George Washington, incapable of telling a lie; more than that, he had the sort of face which commanded belief, and if he became a salesman in after-life, would probably make a fortune.

"But it sounds mad," said Bill, when the recital of the adventure with the uncouth Butcher was finished. "You had some cash on you; why didn't he pinch that?"

"Don't ask me," replied Sleepy. "All I know is that he knocked us out and then grabbed the book. Did you know you still had one of the lot you bought at the sale, by the way?"

Bill shrugged his shoulders.

"No, I didn't. There were several, you know, and I suppose I must have overlooked that one when I chased up here to get them that evening. Not that it matters much, because Percy swindled us anyway."

Batty, who had hitherto taken no part in the conversation, being engaged in reclining in the arm-chair attempting to imitate Hawkshaw the Famous Detective, now broke in.

"It doesn't make sense. Why should anybody go to all that trouble to pinch a notebook—or a scrapbook, come to that? It isn't valuable. A tramp would have taken your cash and not worried about a book."

Feathers, who was feeling sore at the loss of his precious notebook—he had thirty or forty pages full of notes—began to grow angry.

"Well, it was valuable to me," he said. "And if you're going to call us liars you'd better look out. It was a tramp and he *did* pinch the book and nothing else."

"Has it occurred to you he might have made a mistake?" said Bill suddenly.

"A mistake? Don't be a fool, Bill. You can't mistake a book for a pound note!"

"Not that sort of mistake. Suppose he pinched the wrong book?"

Batty, who had actually not thought of this theory, in-

stantly saw that it was a good one. He therefore proceeded to take the credit of it to himself.

"Exactly! Now we're getting somewhere. The tramp wanted to get hold of the scrapbook, but pinched the notebook by mistake."

Feathers, however, was ready with an objection.

"That's all very well, but why should he want the one any more than the other? It's only got some old news cuttings pasted in it."

Batty stretched out his hand for the book and examined it carefully. The others crowded round. Two pages, the first two, were full of cuttings, and it quickly became apparent that they were all very similar. They all consisted of personal messages such as are seen in the "agony" columns of papers. The first instructed an unknown person named Bob to meet the writer under the clock at York station at 11 p.m. on May 1st. The second was a similar message addressed to Uncle, the venue for the meeting being Keswick, and the date June 5th. The rest of the messages were all similar, except that places and dates were all different. In each case, however, the messages were signed "Harry."

"Why on earth should anybody take the trouble to paste them up in a book?" demanded Feathers. "They're only ordinary 'agony' column advertisements."

Batty frowned thoughtfully. It was, he remarked, no good taking that line. *Somebody* had taken the trouble to collect them and there *must* have been a reason.

"I don't think we can assume that whoever did it was crazy," he said. "It looks to me as if this little book, or rather the cuttings in it, are valuable to somebody. I don't know whether you blokes know it, but crooks use the 'agony' columns of the papers quite a lot for getting into contact with their pals. It's not a bad idea, either, because it's only when the messages are all collected together like this that they have any significance to the outsider. And don't forget, all these messages are signed by the same person."

"Yes, but they're all addressed to different people," objected Sleepy.

Bill, whose original idea it had been that the scrapbook was valuable, interrupted to point out that this meant nothing. If the "agony" column messages were in fact the means whereby crooks contacted each other, then probably they had used different names as a precaution.

"Only the chap who drafted them had to use the same name, I suppose," he added, "because it would have made the method too complicated if that had been changed as well."

It was interesting to note that in each message a time and a place were mentioned, which seemed to give weight to the theory that the "agony" columns had been used to contact the members of a gang and fix a rendezvous for some illicit activity.

"That chap calling himself Harry," said Batty, "is the leader of the gang and sends out instructions periodically. The dates and the times refer to some robbery or something, and the places are probably in code and don't mean what they seem to."

Disregarding the fact that there was not an atom of proof of this, the others were prepared to agree. Though it did strike them that the dates were all close together, and that the gang must therefore have been amazingly active. This point, however, Batty shrugged away.

"At any rate," he said, "somebody collected these cuttings for a reason, and if you can think of a better one, let's have it."

They could not, and the discussion lapsed because Bill found something even more interesting in the book. On the last page of all, the intervening ones being blank, several names had been jotted down in pencil. Against each was a sign, this being either a tick, a cross or a question mark.

"I say, just have a look at this," said Bill. "There's definitely something odd going on."

The first name was Hubbard, against this entry appearing a tick. The second was unknown to them, being Higgins. A tick also appeared against his name. At the sight of the third they all looked at each other, and the fourth made them gasp. These two names were Wythes and Brooks. Against Wythes had been placed a thick cross, while after Brooks' name appeared a question mark.

"Now we're getting somewhere," said Batty, viewing the list. "We know every name on the list except the second. In other words they're all mixed up in something, and whatever it is, it isn't a game of marbles." After which piece of brilliant wit he relapsed into silence.

"Half a minute," broke in Sleepy. "We *have* come across the name of Higgins. At least, Feathers and I have.



"Now we're getting somewhere," said Batty.

It was the name of the chap Wythes was talking to on the bridge this afternoon."

In the excitement of the robbery they had clean forgotten to tell the others about this mysterious conversation. When they had recounted what had happened, doing their best to give their hearers some idea of the rather sinister atmosphere which had overhung the incident, Bill was very definite in his opinion.

"There's something crooked going on," he said, "but I'm hanged if I can think what it is. If counterfeiting is at the bottom of it, I don't see how Wythes comes into it. He's a queer sort of chap, but I can't see him being mixed up in forging notes."

Batty, without a word, began to clear the table. The others drew up chairs and settled down to a council of war. There were a large number of items on the agenda—so many that it was not easy to decide where to start. By mutual consent it was left to Batty to lay before the meeting the summary of the many strange occurrences which had marked this particular half-term. This he did with his usual efficiency, jotting down the points on a piece of paper, as was his habit.

First, however, he very briefly explained what had happened at the Bracken police station that afternoon. Police station is, perhaps, a grandiloquent term to describe the cottage which did duty in this capacity. Detective was certainly an extreme description of the sergeant who kept watch and ward over the village. After he had allowed himself to be persuaded that Batty was not there to pull his leg, he had become very businesslike, laboriously writing down in long-hand the complicated statement volunteered. Batty had told him all about the passing of the dud note and the subsequent discovery of Percy at the fair in Brewery Fields. He had also explained his line of reasoning regarding the said Percy, and the facts which seemed to indicate so clearly that the red-faced man was a member of the gang of counterfeitters infesting Cumberland and Westmorland. Finally, he had sat back and prepared to accept graciously the compliments which undoubtedly would be heaped on his head by the grateful sergeant.

Instead of that, all Huthwaite had said was, "Well, I'll have to see about it. And next time, sonny, you come to me straight away and don't delay. If you'd told me about that

dud note at the time, I might have been able to do something."

"I like his cheek!" said Batty violently. "Anyway, that's that, and as far as I could make out, Huthwaite will just sit back and forget all about it. But we've done all we can. We've informed the police and that's all the thanks we get. From now on we work on our own. Any objections?"

There were none; but as Bill pointed out, it was all very well to talk about working on their own provided that they knew what they were supposed to be working on. Batty snorted.

"If you're too thick-headed to understand, then I suppose I'll have to explain," he said. "Now just listen to this."

Referring to his notes, and frequently adding to them, he began to talk and went on talking for some considerable time.

When they considered the facts as outlined by Batty, they were forced to the conclusion that not only had chance pitchforked them into the middle of some queer goings on, but that it was more than likely that they had not yet seen the end of the affair. As Batty pointed out, it was up to them to undertake a spot of investigation.

"And after Huthwaite's blithering," he said, "I vote we carry on entirely on our own. Unless you chaps feel you ought to report the attack on you this afternoon?"

Sleepy and Feathers had no desire to become involved in the cumbersome machinery of the law. It would mean endless questioning, they thought, and in any case it would be good sport trying their own hands at detective work.

With this point settled, Batty carried on with his summary of events. It was a model of brevity and clear thinking. According to him, the whole affair had started with Bill's foolish purchase of the books—Bill scowled at this but said nothing. This action had set the ball rolling, for subsequent events seemed to prove that the books—or one of them—were of vital importance to certain people, including Mr. Percy Hubbard. The attempt to purchase them, which would have succeeded had it not been for the overlooking of the one book, and the subsequent robbery, clearly showed that the shabby volume contained something of more than ordinary interest. The fact that having examined the cuttings and the list of names they were really none the wiser, although they now held definite suspicions, proved nothing. Although the

volume had provided them only with suspicions, the gang might believe that its possession by outsiders would, in the long run, prove awkward.

"And so it probably will," said Batty. "Later on we may find it provides conclusive evidence against them. But what it comes down to is this. We've got hold of a book that Percy and his pals want badly—very badly. We also know that Percy is in the habit of carrying dud notes about with him, and in conjunction with the knowledge that the police are on the look-out for a gang of forgers in this part of the country, that seems to indicate that Percy is in with the gang and the book is evidence against them."

At this point, Bill, who had been thinking hard, broke in.

"I say, Sleepy, can you describe the little man, Higgins? I've got an inspiration."

As well as he could, Sleepy described the appearance of the man who had conversed so mysteriously with Wythes that afternoon on the bridge. When he had finished, Bill nodded.

"There's not much doubt about it," he said. "That was the same bloke who was with Percy when they ran into the bike above Great Firkin."

Though this opinion was not to be taken as conclusive evidence of identity, they accepted it for the moment.

"O.K., we'll come to that later," said Batty. "Now, I've got a theory to put forward. Brooks was at tea this afternoon when you two talked about the book. We know from the list of names in it that he is mixed up in something fishy, and almost certainly with the gang. At any rate, we'll assume as much. In that case, he knew that Sleepy had handed to Feathers the notebook, and therefore naturally assumed that Sleepy still had the other book. He wasn't to know that Sleepy made a mistake and handed to Feathers the wrong book. If you ask me, Brooks saw you off, then made an excuse to Vanstone and tore off across country to contact the rough who robbed you. I suppose Brooks knew he was there—perhaps waiting to see him. If you and Feathers followed the ordinary path from Vanstone's, Brooks could easily have got in front of you without you seeing him."

This seemed a reasonable theory and was accepted for lack of any evidence to the contrary. At this point Batty turned to his twin. He had remembered Sleepy's pre-

occupation ever since he had turned back on that afternoon when they had met Vanstone and Brooks.

"Did you see Brooks up to anything fishy?" he inquired. "Come on, spill the beans."

Slowly Sleepy admitted that he had wondered, ever since that afternoon, what Brooks was up to.

"I went back and came up to them without them seeing me," he said. "Brooks was examining some pound notes and didn't hear me behind him. When he turned round and found me at his elbow, he sort of went white and stuffed the notes in his pocket. It seemed a bit queer, especially after Percy had passed that dud note."

"Queer! I should think it was. Why on earth didn't you tell us about it before?"

Sleepy looked uncomfortable and murmured something about making sure first. Batty snorted and turned to the others.

"That just about proves that Brooks really is up to his eyes in it," he said. "That means we know of Brooks, Percy Hubbard, Wythes and the rat-faced Higgins."

The conversation between the last two seemed, however, to have little bearing on counterfeiting. An arrangement had been made for some birds to be delivered at Peartree Farm late at night. Apart from the unusual hour mentioned, there was little extraordinary in this. Yet, believing that the two men were connected with a gang of criminals, it was natural to assume that the conversation was not as innocent as it seemed. Bill still stuck to his opinion that Wythes would not lend himself to forgery, although he would do a lot for money. On the other hand, if he were not mixed up in the criminal activities of the gang, what was he doing talking to rat-face?

At all events, Study 6 had a nice bag of mystery already, and a few more ingredients only made it more interesting. There was the Percy Hubbard gang, composed, as far as they knew, of Percy, rat-face and Brooks; there was the link between the shabby scrapbook and all three men; there was Wythes and his mysterious activities; there was the unsavoury individual who had attacked Sleepy and Feathers, certainly connected with Brooks, and therefore probably with Percy & Co. In the opinion of Study 6 it was good going and promised a half-term of more than usual interest.

It was at this point in their discussion that Destiny decided to stick another spoke in the wheel. She dispatched Piper minor to Study 6 with a message.

"Trant's compliments, and will you go along and see him at your convenience," said the youngster, poking his head through the doorway and addressing Bill in a high-pitched voice.

Bill's face lit up. Miss Gough had delegated him to collect the money for eggs supplied. It was with some satisfaction, therefore, that he departed in search of Trant, for it is always pleasant to reap the reward of cleverness, even though, as in this instance, no financial benefit would accrue to the author of the scheme. The hens now seemed to be in great form, and, barring accidents, should provide Miss Gough with the badly needed profit which would keep the Honey Pot going for a bit longer.

"It's a funny thing," said Sleepy slowly, when Bill had left the study, "but it really looks as if that chump has backed a winner for once."

CHAPTER IX

PLANS ARE LAID

BILL re-entered the study with a beaming face. There was no mistaking the significance of his self-satisfied expression. "Boy, am I clever!" it said, plainer than words. Study 6 groaned in spirit. True, the fact that Bill was waving a ten shilling note while silver chinked musically in his other hand proved that Trant had stumped up for the eggs so far delivered; but even the thought that Miss Gough was on the road to success hardly compensated for Bill's good opinion of himself.

"Not so bad," murmured the founder of the Honey Pot poultry farm, "not so bad! Nine dozen eggs at $1/6$ a dozen equals $14/6$. And next time there'll be more, with a full week's supply delivered. Old Trant was jolly decent about it. Said he was making up the deficit this week by buying from the shops, but that next week he hoped Miss Gough could supply the full quota.

"I daresay," said Sleepy ironically, "seeing that the

blighter probably makes 6d. a dozen by selling to the house-keeper at a profit."

Bill was pocketing the note when Batty stretched out a long arm. He twitched the ten shilling note out of Bill's hand and held it to the light. He then assumed a knowing air and spoke with conviction. It was his hour of triumph, wiping out the memory of a previous occasion when he himself had been swindled by Percy Hubbard.

"It's a dud," he said briefly, throwing the note on to the table, where it lay forlorn in its sheep's clothing.

There was a deadly hush in Study 6. They all knew Batty too well to believe that he had made a mistake or that he had chosen a malicious way of getting his own back on Bill, who had on the other occasion identified the note paid by Percy as a forgery. If Batty said the note was a dud then it was a dud. More for the look of the thing than anything else, Bill picked it up and examined it. He threw it down in disgust.

"I was too interested in getting my hands on the cash to think of anything like this," he said. "But by George, I'll go and have a few words with Trant about it."

He had reached the door before Batty's voice arrested him.

"Just a minute, I'll come with you."

Without a word Bill waited for him, and in gloomy companionship they marched down to Trant's quarters.

"Can I help you, sir?"

Trant was as calm and efficient as ever—and as courteous. His calm, however, only served to make Bill angrier than ever.

"Look here, Trant, you gave me a dud note just now."

He thrust the ten shilling note on the table, right under the butler's eyes. Trant picked it up, carried it to the window, examined it carefully and then took out his wallet.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, not a whit put out. "Here is another, he added, "I think you will find that genuine enough."

Bill found himself grasping a note about whose reputation there could be no doubt. Trant calmly replaced the dud in his pocket-book.

"Will that be all, sir?"

Bill looked helplessly at Batty. The scene had not gone



"Look here, you gave me a dud note just now."

according to plan. Though he had not had the nerve to suggest such a theory, he had in his own mind decided that Trant, like Percy, had been well aware that he was carrying dud notes. This calm acceptance of the situation, however, had hurled that theory to the ground. There was not a trace of guiltiness about the man's manner.

"How did you get it, Trant?" asked Batty casually.

"I couldn't say, sir. There are rather a lot about just now, I believe."

"But surely you can remember where it came from?" persisted Batty. "It might be important, you know."

"I can't remember, sir. Will that be all for now?"

There was no mistaking the dismissal implied in these words. Bill and Batty walked slowly back to the study, the frown on Batty's noble forehead clearly indicating that something was troubling him.

Briefly Bill recounted what had happened in the butler's room.

"We've got the note replaced," he said, "but Trant couldn't remember where he got it from, so it doesn't take us much further."

"Doesn't it?" enquired Batty, "I'm not so sure."

Study 6 sat and looked at him. Whatever was on his mind would be spilled forth if they were patient enough. Batty stared out of the window, snorted quietly to himself, and gave tongue.

"Look here, we all know how careful Trant is with cash. He always has been. Do you really suppose that anybody could have passed a dud note off on him without him noticing?"

Nobody said anything in answer to this question. They rightly surmised that it required no answer.

"What's more, his manner was queer just now. Didn't you think so, Bill?"

Bill puckered his forehead. As a matter of fact he had not thought so, but Batty evidently had some reason for his supposition. Bill waited for more data before committing himself.

"Trant doesn't get a large salary here," continued Batty, "butlers don't, you know. But he took the loss of ten bob as calmly as anything. I thought it was jolly suspicious."

If I'd been in his place at any rate I should have cursed a bit at having been taken in."

There was certainly something in this, and now that Bill really thought about it, he realised that the butler's calm acceptance of the situation had been abnormal. As Batty had said, the loss of even ten bob should be no light matter to the man.

"You don't really think Trant is mixed up with the gang, do you?" enquired Feathers.

It says something for Batty's personality that with not an atom of concrete evidence in support of this remarkable theory, the others should have accepted it. Bill, of course, was already biased, for the first thought that had flashed through his mind when the discovery of the dud note had been made, was that Trant might be in league with Percy & Co. The others, however, who had not even witnessed Trant's behaviour in his room, gave excellent proof of their faith in Batty's brain by accepting the theory without question.

"O.K. we'll watch him," said Sleepy laconically. "What's one among so many, anyway?"

"What's the next move?" enquired Bill. "Any ideas, Batty?"

This was a purely rhetorical question, for Batty was obviously teeming with ideas.

"We've got to get it worked out properly," he said. "There are several lines of approach, and we'd better arrange who shall tackle which."

For a few minutes he scribbled busily, while the others, quite content to leave the organisation in his hands waited patiently. At last he threw down the pencil, picked up the paper and read from it.

"The trails we've got to follow are these," he said. "First, there's Percy and the little rat-faced chap to be contacted somehow, we know that Wythes is in touch with them, and if we watch him we ought to get on to the others—I should think. Then there's the book. We don't know exactly what its significance is yet, but it's obviously important to Percy & Co. We've got to find out how it ever came to be for sale. I suggest we investigate at Great Firkin and find out as much as possible about the chap whose stuff was sold up."

"He's dead," said Bill briefly. "Captain Webb his name was."

"It doesn't matter about him being dead," said Batty impatiently. "Either that book was among his stuff by accident, or he was responsible for it being there. If so, we ought to be able to find out why. Then, of course, there's Brooks. We've no definite proof that he is mixed up in the gang, but there's strong circumstantial evidence. He was there when Feathers discovered that he'd got that scrap-book, and immediately afterwards an attempt was made to pinch it. It looks suspicious. Also, of course, there's the fact that he appears in the book. He's worth watching."

"I should say so," broke in Bill. "What about those pound notes Sleepy saw him examining? I'll bet he's up to his neck in the business."

By unanimous consent, therefore, it was voted that the doctor's servant should be kept under observation. Trant they had already decided to watch, in the hope that Batty's theory regarding his participation in the forging of bank notes was correct. The list of trails was therefore a formidable one. Wythes, Trant, Brooks and the deceased Captain Webb provided four promising lines of investigation.

"This is how we'll work it," said Batty, who was now completely in his element. "Bill had better trot over to Great Firkin and see what he can find out about Captain Webb. On the motor-bike it won't take long to get there, and you never know your luck. Feathers had better look after Wythes, because he's always hanging around Peartree anyway and it won't look suspicious if he's seen. I'll look after Trant, and Sleepy had better keep an eye on Brooks. Does that suit you?"

It seemed that it did; Batty usually did the thinking, the others having grown accustomed to obeying his orders. It was considerably less fatiguing in the long run. Feathers, however, raised one point. With the extra information they now possessed it seemed to him that they ought to go to the police again.

"After all," he said, "they can deal with it better than we can."

Batty snorted violently, glaring at Feathers malevolently. "Oh, yes, and come away with another flea in our ears! I've been once, and a fat lot of thanks I got. Besides

we've got no proof at all, and Huthwaite would only laugh at us. He's half inclined to think I was pulling his leg as it is. I vote we carry on ourselves, for the time being at any rate."

There was no question which way the meeting would vote. Here was the chance of a little excitement, and, although they were not in their heart of hearts convinced that any concrete result would ensue from their investigations, they were not prepared to forgo the bare possibility. Besides, they had already salved their consciences by going to the police in the first place, and as Batty had said, had got a flea in their ears. When they had accumulated proof that the gang the police were looking for were in reality operating in the Bracken neighbourhood; when they could go to Huthwaite and plank down on the table evidence that would send Percy & Co. to gaol, that would be a different story. At the moment, however, it was all so much hot air, though it promised a spot of excitement.

"All right, I only mentioned it," said Feathers calmly. "If the bobbies come along swearing at you for keeping it all to yourselves, don't say I didn't warn you, that's all."

The meeting then broke up, preparation claiming their attention for the rest of the evening. The trails could not be picked up for a day or so, although Batty for one was sorely tempted to make an attempt to get up to Peartree to see exactly what sort of cargo was being delivered there that night. Wiser counsels prevailed, however, and without much interest he grabbed the great work entitled *Pro Milone* and prepared to give at least some part of his attention to that epic defence of a gangster.

There was one other aspect of the affair of the counterfeit bank notes that was worrying him, however, though he had scrupulously avoided mentioning it while Bill and Feathers were present. As soon as he was alone with Sleepy he shut up his books with some deliberation.

"So it was Brooks you were worrying about?" he enquired.

Was there just a suspicion of hesitancy on Sleepy's part when he answered? Just a trifle of evasiveness?

"I see," said Batty when the reluctant affirmative had left his twin's lips. "I see," he added in a tone that left no doubt that he did not believe it.

CHAPTER X

BATTY ON THE TRAIL

IT was two days before the investigations could commence. The Saturday matches required the presence of all four members of Study 6, a lamentable occurrence, but one which could not be avoided. Sunday, however, was almost a day of rest at Bracken, the school being free from lunch time until evening chapel, tea being a voluntary feast. As soon as Parsons came out of the dining hall, therefore, Batty gathered his men about him.

"We've got five hours," he said, "and you all know your jobs. Get moving."

Like a good general, he watched them go their several ways, Bill to Peartree to pick up the two-stroke, and then go on to Great Firkin; Sleepy to the doctor's house, in the hope that he could get on the trail of Brooks; Feathers to Peartree to keep an eye on Wythes. Then, cautiously treading, Batty himself wended his way towards the abode of Trant. He, by immemorial custom, retired to his bedroom on Sunday afternoons, there to recline in the lap of Morpheus and wash away his sorrows with sleep. His other room, which he used during the day, should therefore be empty. and Batty had a mind to undertake a little exploration. He did not expect to find a printing press, nor even a wad of forged notes; he hoped, however, to come across some kind of clue which would establish once and for all whether the butler was really connected with the distribution of forged bank notes.

Though he knew that Trant was safely in his bedroom, it was with some trepidation that he approached the butler's parlour and turned the knob. Though he was word perfect in the story he would tell if by any unforeseen chance Trant should return earlier than was his custom, Batty still felt his heart beating quicker than usual as he entered the room. He felt like Arsene Lupin and Raffles rolled into one, but sadly lacking in their reputed nerve. For one wild moment he wondered whether the room really was unoccupied; but as the door swung quietly open he saw that it was indeed untenanted. Stealthily he went in, shut the door behind him and stared round.

It was a cosy little room, well furnished and neatly kept. As indeed, was only to be expected of the scrupulous Trant. If anything, there was a little too much furniture, and as Batty cast a contemplative eye over the tables, desk, cupboards and chairs, he wondered where on earth he was going to start. It was all very well deciding to explore the place, but it was quite another thing to put the proposition into practice. In detective stories the hero always seemed to have some sort of uncanny instinct which directed him to the room where lay hidden the secret he was looking for. In real life Batty discovered himself to be lamentably lacking in this useful sort of trait. One valuable tip, however, he had culled from his incessant reading of thrillers ; he knew how important it was to replace exactly everything he disturbed in the course of his search.

Deciding that a start must be made somewhere, he walked over to the desk and tried the top drawer. To his surprise it opened easily. For a crook—which Batty was convinced Trant was—he was singularly careless. It was with a rather funny feeling in his stomach that Batty rifled the butler's desk. After seventeen years of fairly strict upbringing, during which period it had on several occasions been brought home to him that in polite society one minds one's own business, it went against the grain to poke and pry in another person's desk. However, Batty told himself that the cause was a just one, and put his doubts aside.

It was therefore unfortunate that after salving his conscience in this way the desk should have yielded nothing whatever of interest. Some old letters, bills, receipts, and a few odd papers comprised the entire contents of the desk. In none of the drawers was there anything indicating even a remote connection with a gang of forgers. Batty turned his attention to the cupboards, which likewise yielded nothing of value. So far the expedition had proved completely profitless. A lesser man than Batty might at this juncture have called it a day and evacuated the room. But not Batty! He was made of stouter stuff. Keeping a wary ear alert for footsteps along the passage outside, he turned his attention to a small medicine chest which stood on the window-seat. Though it was extremely unlikely that Trant would keep anything of value in such a receptacle, Batty was taking no chances.

Standing on the one shelf of the small cupboard were two bottles. At first sight it seemed as if Trant must suffer badly from indigestion, for each of the bottles had at one time contained a well-known proprietary brand of stomach powder, as was proved by their intact labels. Batty was about to close the cupboard in disgust when something made him look at the bottles more closely. Indigestion powder is white; the two bottles, however, contained not a trace of white powder. One was a delicate shade of blue, the other was green. In the usual way this would not have interested Batty, but in the circumstances anything out of the ordinary deserved consideration. He stared at the bottles with puckered brow, unscrewed one and tasted the contents—which was bitter to the tongue—and finally poured a tiny portion of each into two scraps of paper, which he twisted carefully to prevent spilling. He was not quite sure exactly why he was taking these samples; probably a desire not to return completely empty-handed was at the root of the matter. In any case, Batty was a careful youth.

With the papers safely stowed away in his pocket book, he discovered that already nearly an hour had slipped away. It was time to be moving, for Trant frequently returned to the parlour in the middle of the afternoon. It was as well that Batty decided to go, for he had only just gained the end of the passage and turned the corner, when he heard footsteps approaching from the other direction. Peering cautiously round the angle he saw Trant turn into the room. Devoutly hoping that the butler would come upon no signs of disturbance within his sanctuary, Batty waited patiently. If Trant decided to go out that afternoon, Batty would be well on his trail.

More than half an hour elapsed before the creaking of the door warned the watcher that things were on the move. Keeping well under cover he watched his quarry carefully close the door, hesitate for a moment in the passage, as if undecided which way to go and eventually move off with his back to him. Thus the hunted and the hunter passed out of Parsons. Hawkshaw was on the trail!

There then followed a difficult forty minutes; difficult, that is, for Batty, who discovered that although in detective stories it may sound the easiest thing in the world to follow a man without being seen, in real life it does not work out



Something made him look at the bottle more closely.

like that. What with dodging behind bushes and trees, flinging himself flat on his face behind stone walls and completely missing his quarry on at least two occasions, Batty was feeling worn out by the time Peartree came into sight. For some time he had been suspicious that the butler was making for the farm, and when it became obvious that this was indeed his intention, Hawkshaw felt his heart lift. Trant, as was well known, frequently collected from the farm the butter supplied by Wythes to Parson's House ; but a Sunday afternoon was definitely not the time for a business call. Although the evidence was exceedingly circumstantial, this visit might well prove a link between the butler and the gang, who themselves seemed to have some connection with Peartree.

There was not a sign of Feathers, although Batty had thought it more than likely that he would see the naturalist, who was supposed to be watching Wythes. In fact, there was no life stirring at all as Trant turned in at the field gate. The farm basked in the afternoon sunshine and not a sound disturbed the stillness. Giving the butler a few minutes to get out of sight, Batty in turn slipped through the gate, and crept along the narrow path past the shed where Bill kept his two-stroke. Beyond the shed was a large field, and on the right of this the farmyard, flanked by sheds and stables. It was impossible for Trant to have gone across the field without being seen, and he must, therefore, have crossed the farmyard, though neither sight nor sound of him rewarded Batty's peering.

At last, risking the possibility that the butler would suddenly emerge from one of the sheds and meet his tracker, Batty cautiously crossed the yard. Still there was no movement to guide him to his quarry. Batty's heart was beating quicker as he peered into the first shed to find only emptiness. Trant's movements since arriving at the farm were peculiar. Hitherto it was possible that an ordinary friendly visit to Wythes, perhaps for tea, constituted the reason for the walk to Peartree ; but that theory was knocked on the head by the butler's furtive actions. It certainly looked as if he were up to something — something which demanded secrecy and furtiveness.

It was just as Batty was turning away from the first shed that a sudden movement drove him back again. From the shelter of the doorway he saw Trant come into view,

having evidently just vacated one of the sheds farther along the row, though which one it was impossible to guess. Without a backward glance the butler strode off across the yard, disappearing round the corner of the makeshift garage.

Batty was now faced with a problem. He wanted to follow Trant, but he also wanted to find out what the man had been doing. With only a few moments in which to reach a decision, Batty's mind moved rapidly. At last, influenced as much by the memory of that uncomfortable journey to Peartree as anything else, Batty decided to investigate the sheds. First making sure that he was unobserved from the house, he entered the second shed, which was full of farm equipment and contained nothing of particular interest. Exploring each shed in turn he discovered that of the seven, six were wide open, the seventh being equipped with a massive padlock. The others being either empty or containing nothing of significance, it was inevitable that the locked door should fascinate Batty. True, he had not heard Trant turn a key in the lock, but the angle of the outbuildings had hidden the butler for long enough to enable him to have done so without being seen or heard. It was, decided Batty, a hundred to one that it was this shed which Trant had entered.

A mere glance at the lock was sufficient to show Batty that it was impossible to break it open without the use of tools. More than that, even if he did succeed, the damage would be plain to see—the last thing Batty wanted. A small window, however, halfway up the wall offered the opportunity of inspecting the interior. Batty grasped a cross beam, hoisted himself up and peered through the glass. To his surprise he found that the interior was well lit in spite of the fact that the only window in the side facing the yard was so small. The opposite side of the shed, which backed on to a thick, high hedge, was open to the daylight, being equipped with wire-netted runs stretching from the back of the shed to the hedge. Tenanted these runs were some half a dozen birds—hens, Batty decided after the first glance—each separated from its neighbours by wire. There were, in fact, six runs parallel to each other, the shed providing shelter for part of each.

On closer inspection Batty came to the conclusion that the birds were not hens. He knew very little about such

matters, but even so, he could tell the difference between cocks and hens. These were almost certainly cocks, though Batty had never before seen any quite like them. They were large, upstanding birds, with necks taller than usual and a strutting walk. Fine creatures undoubtedly, but being without the power of speech unable to explain for Batty, Trant's reason in so furtively calling upon them. They strutted, made queer noises at each other, and occasionally indulged in what Batty could only suppose was a swearing match, but they did not talk.

Slowly Batty climbed down from the window. He gave it up. Trant had approached the farm furtively; he had entered one of the sheds with every appearance of secrecy; he had then made off as he had come, stealthily. The reason for his behaviour, however, was as much a mystery as ever. The other sheds containing nothing of any possible interest, the only plausible conclusion was that it had been the locked shed he had visited. Yet however Batty cudgelled his brain he could not arrive at even the glimmering of an idea of the reason.

Thoughtfully he retraced his steps to Braken. His afternoon had been wasted. He had come upon no proof of the butler's complicity in the counterfeit money affair; he had not even discovered the reason for the stealthy visit to Peartree. Life, decided Batty, was hard. With his usual stubbornness, however, he refused to go back on his theory. Trant was mixed up in the business, and before he was finished Hawkshaw was going to obtain proof of his.

CHAPTER XI

THE PLOT THICKENS

"I'VE had a fatiguing afternoon," said Bill, reaching out for the last cake on the plate. "And it's no good worrying me until I've recuperated. Then, and not until then, will I reveal all."

"Greedy hog," replied Batty politely. "Get on with it, can't you?"

Bill looked at Batty in surprise. He was accustomed to the brainy one shouting; he was quite used to him in sar-

castic mood ; but Batty touchy and irritable was definitely a new one on Bill.

"Comrade Batty isn't his usual sunny self," he remarked to nobody in particular.

Batty, who was still worrying over the afternoon's mystery, only grunted. He knew better, however, than to press Bill. That worthy, when the mood took him, was capable of prolonging the suspense out of sheer devilment if he suspected undue eagerness on the part of his audience. Bill had a keen sense of the dramatic.

By half-past five the four detectives had returned to Bracken and reported progress. At least, four had returned, but so far only three had handed in reports. Bill had indicated that his afternoon had not been unsuccessful, but further than that he refused to go until he had finished his tea. The others had been more dutiful. Sleepy had reported nothing of interest. He had gone up to the doctor's house, had a chat with Vanstone, hung about until Brooks had made an appearance, and finally departed, his knowledge increased by exactly nil.

"And is that all?" wailed Batty.

His twin had nodded briefly, though the slight suspicion of hesitation caused Batty to glance at him sharply. He was about fed up with Sleepy's reticence. He had no proof that he was still being secretive, especially since it had come out that Sleepy's suspicions had been directed against Brooks from the very first ; but just the same, he was convinced that something was being held back. Sleepy, he decided, was a curse, though how to deal with him in his present stubborn mood was more than he could decide.

The gloom was raised somewhat by the report of Feathers. He had gone straight to Peartree as arranged, arriving there some time before Batty had put in an appearance. He had been quickly rewarded by the sight of Farmer Wythes emerging in his Sunday best, a proceeding which Feathers knew very well was most exceptional. Farmer Wythes was a man who liked his Sunday afternoon nap ; only some emergency could have brought him out so early—an emergency or something of more than usual importance. At all events, Feathers followed him expectantly. To the naturalist, experienced at following trails, the job of keeping Wythes in sight and remaining hidden himself was child's play—very

different from the task which had confronted Batty in similar circumstances; Feathers had no need to throw himself violently to earth and crawl about behind bushes; but just the same, Wythes had not a suspicion that he was being followed. It was just the difference between a professional and an amateur.

Wythes had made straight for Bracken, had passed through the main street and thus out on to the Great Firkin road. Half a mile beyond Bracken he had turned down a narrow lane, eventually reaching a field in which was parked a caravan. With heightened excitement, Feathers had realised that he had seen that vehicle before—at the fair in Brewery Fields. It was a trailer caravan for towing behind a car, but, being painted in unusually gaudy colours, identification was easy.

"At the fair," said Feathers, "it was parked just behind that shooting gallery. You know, the one where Sleepy had that dust-up with the owner. So, of course, I wasn't particularly surprised when I saw who came out to meet Wythes."

"Percy!" murmured the rest of Study 6 simultaneously.

It had indeed been the unpleasant, red-faced Percy Hubbard who had greeted Wythes briefly.

"Come inside, it's safer," he had said, no doubt making an attempt to lower his voice, but nevertheless speaking loudly enough for Feathers to hear from the other side of the hedge.

Giving Wythes and Percy long enough to gain the shelter of the caravan, Feathers had crept across the grass and eventually parked himself just under an open window. From this strategic position he had been able to hear snatches of conversation from inside the caravan.

"I couldn't hear everything that was said," Feathers continued, "because every now and again I had to duck in case they saw me. But I did hear quite a bit. It didn't mean an awful lot, but the last item was interesting."

The first part of the conversation had consisted, as far as Feathers could make out, of Wythes grumbling about having to look after something. He had said over and over again what a risk it was. Percy had grown impatient after a bit, and had told the farmer to shut up. He was, he informed him, getting well paid for any risk he took. Wythes had gone on grumbling, but eventually had quietened down.

"There's definitely something fishy going on," said

Feathers, "because I heard Wythes say something about the police and about wanting more money. Percy said that he could do nothing about that, and any complaints had better be put in front of the gov'nor. That seemed to shut old Wythes up completely. Funny thing, but even outside the caravan I could sort of feel the old boy growing scared."

Then Percy had started talking, and seemed to be giving instructions. Feathers had not been able to catch all that he said because twice movements in the caravan had caused him to dodge out of sight. He had heard the tail-end of the orders, however.

"Now, you've got that clear, haven't you?" Percy had demanded. "Humstone Fell, ten o'clock next Friday night. You'd better be there well by ten, and we can make a start by ten-thirty. There's a stack of money at stake, so make sure your end is O.K."

That was the last thing Feathers heard, for there then came unmistakable signs that Wythes was preparing to leave the caravan. The naturalist just gained the shelter of the hedge before the farmer emerged from the vehicle.

"I followed him back to Peartree," Feathers ended, "but nothing else happened, so I made straight back to Parson's."

Batty, who had not yet explained his own adventures, flicked over the pages of the pocket-book in which he had been making notes. Things were definitely moving, and the afternoon's work had not been wasted even if no other result had been obtained. As Bill had obviously had some luck, however, that possibility could be dismissed.

"Now then," said Batty, turning to the replete Bill, "let's have your yarn. We'll correlate when we've got all the reports noted down. That means see how far we've got when all the statements are added together," he explained gratuitously. But that was the trouble with Batty; he always assumed that his friends were nit-wits.

"Well, I was pretty lucky," said Bill casually. "I found out that the chap whose furniture was sold up that day at Great Firkin—Captain Webb—was murdered."

Study 6 looked at Bill and then at each other. Then, as one man, they shrugged their shoulders.

"It's hot, of course," said Sleepy.

"Very hot," agreed Feathers. "You can't wonder at

it, I suppose. He's been going dippy for years. Sort of gradually, you know. Only now it's getting more violent."

Bill smiled—a superior smile.

"Take it or leave it," he said. "I'm just telling you. Captain Webb was murdered."

Batty, who had remained silent, now took a hand in the conversation.

"You're not by any chance serious, are you?"

It appeared that Bill was quite serious.

"Of course, I'm not absolutely certain. I've got no proof, but it's a distinct possibility," he said, toning down his original startling statement. "In view of what we already know, and what I've picked up this afternoon," he added, imitating Hawkshaw even better than Batty had done.

"What you really mean, I suppose," snorted Batty, "is that you've worked out some fantastic theory and haven't got a spot of evidence to support it."

As it turned out, however, this was not quite correct. For once Bill had stumbled upon something really useful. It appeared that he had reached Great Firkin early in the afternoon, the two-stroke having behaved itself quite well. His first call had been at the late Captain Webb's house, now occupied by a certain well-known lady novelist. Miss Eileen Watkin was a large, languishing lady of uncertain years. Bill, with what he fondly imagined was superb guile, gained entrance by pretending to be an ardent reader of such masterpieces as "Love But One" and "'Neath the Old Tree." It was fortunate that he had only that same week noticed these titles in the Bracken bookshop and was thus able to pass muster. Miss Watkin had not seemed surprised that her readers should number amongst them one so young, or that this particular youth should have been distinguished by an unusually tough appearance. No doubt she thought that her books would have a softening influence on his life.

"On my head more likely," said Bill with a shudder. "Still, I managed to get invited in, and got the conversation round to Captain Webb quite easily."

"Poor Captain Webb," Miss Watkin had said, shuddering slightly. "Such a nice man, but so mysterious."

"Really?" murmured Bill politely, ears well pricked.

"But of course, you wouldn't know. I was quite friendly with him for years," here Miss Watkin sighed romantically,

"and I always promised him that I would buy his house if anything ever happened to him. And it did, of course. Happen, I mean."

To say that Bill was interested is to put it mildly. He was enthralled, and, to his relief, found his hostess quite easy to lead on to more details of the mysterious Captain Webb. It seemed that he had, during the 1914 war, been attached to military intelligence as a counter-espionage officer.

"He had a most interesting life," said Miss Watkin. "In fact, between you and me, I used him as a model for my Major Smythe in 'Old Hearts For New.' I expect you remember?"

"I should think I do," replied Bill. "Marvellous character."

Fortunately the lady did not press for more details of a character Bill had heard of that afternoon for the first time in his life, nor of the book, of which he was equally ignorant.

"Of course," she continued, "he would never tell me anything definite, but I am quite sure that he was still dabbling in intelligence work. Once or twice he let slip that he was helping Scotland Yard, or had helped them, or something," she said vaguely. "Just before his death he hinted that he was working on a case up here in his own county. He reminded me, jokingly, that I had promised to buy his house if anything should happen to him. At least, he pretended to say it jokingly, but I believe he meant it."

"But he died quite naturally," said Bill. "Heart failure, wasn't it?"

"That's what they said," replied the novelist. "But what is heart failure? If you see what I mean?"

Bill had seen what she meant, but realising also that the lurid imagination of a sensational novelist would find no difficulty in conjuring up half a dozen fantastic explanations for a perfectly natural death, had privately decided that Miss Watkin was a trifle touched.

"I am probably being very indiscreet," the lady had continued, "but I'm one of those people who can't keep things to themselves. And I'm not the only one who suspects foul play," she ended, dropping her voice. "Old Martha, who looked after Captain Webb like a mother, swears that he didn't die naturally."

When Bill reached this point in his narrative there was silence for a few moments in Study 6.

"Gosh, we seem to have bitten off quite a mouthful," said Feathers at last. "First it was just counterfeiting, and now it's murder, if you please!"

Batty snorted derisively. It was just like Batty to start a hare and then refuse to hunt it when somebody else made the running, so to speak.

"He goes trotting off to see one of his girl friends," he said sarcastically, "and comes back with the plot of her latest book. And, what's more, expects us to believe it!"

Bill, however, seemed not a bit put out by this offensive remark. His story was not yet finished.

Having probed sufficiently to discover that Miss Watkin had nothing definite to go on, and had, in fact, spilled all the beans of which she was capable, he had made his way back to the village of Great Firkin.

"I found out where this Martha lived," he said, "and I thought I'd look her up and see what she had to say. She makes topping cakes," he added irrelevantly.

Old Martha was an apt description, for she turned out to be a rosy-cheeked old lady of nearly eighty, but equipped with a brain as shrewd as ever. Bill, who had always possessed one outstanding faculty—an ability to endear himself to elderly members of the female sex—had experienced no difficulty in getting on the right side of Martha. He had finished up in her spotless little parlour demolishing her cake. He had also managed to steer the conversation in the direction he wished it to take.

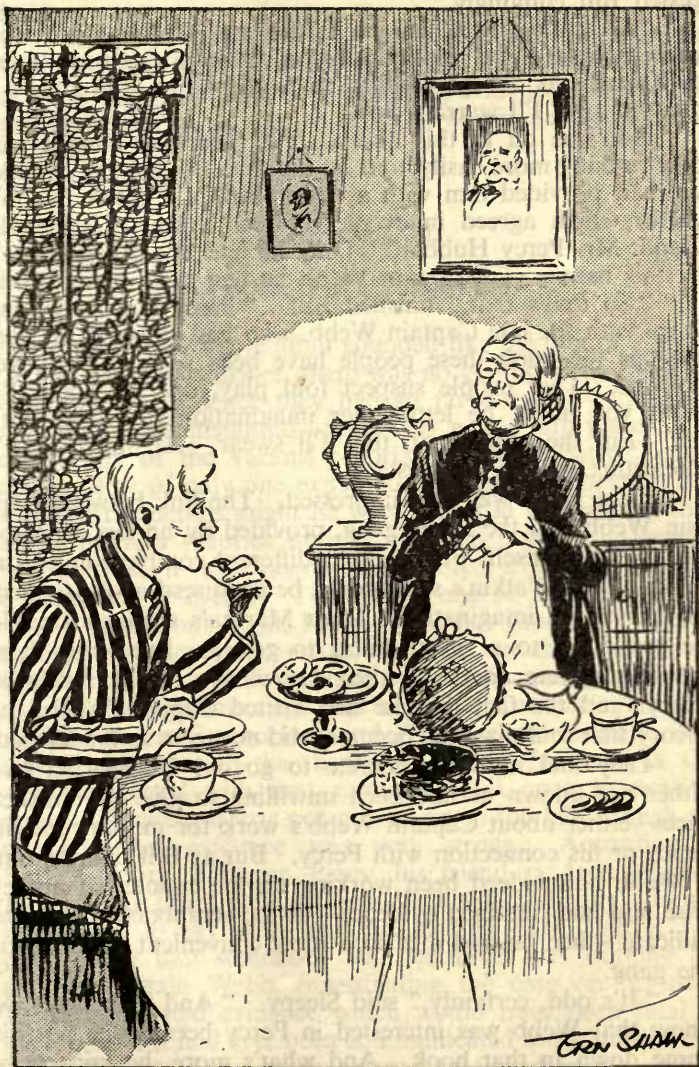
"What impressed me," he now told his confederates, "was the fact that she was so jolly reluctant to talk about Captain Webb at all. Sort of shut up and went all tight-lipped. You couldn't have accused her of being romantically minded," he added, turning on Batty.

"The less said about David, the better," she had said, this evidently being her late employer's first name.

"Funny he should have died like that," replied Bill. "So suddenly, you know."

Martha answered nothing to this at first, but busied herself with the tea-pot. Suddenly, however, she did speak.

"Inquests!" she ejaculated. "Doctor's certificates!"



"Funny he should have died like that," replied Bill.

"I always say they can be faked easily enough," suggested Bill cunningly.

"Of course they can be faked, and there's those who know how to do it," replied Martha. "There's that red-faced man who was always coming up to the house—he knows a thing or two, I'll warrant you."

Bill was on to this like a shot. Martha's tongue was now running more easily, and by the time Bill left the cottage, she had provided him with a description of Captain Webb's visitor which agreed in every detail with that of their old friend, Mr. Percy Hubbard. Only he had not called himself by this name. To Captain Webb he had been plain Smith.

"So that's that," finished Bill. "Percy had something to do with the late Captain Webb, who had amongst his possessions the book these people have been so anxious to get hold of. Two people suspect foul play, one of whom I'll grant you might be letting her imagination run away with her. But the other isn't, that I'll swear. At any rate, it's interesting, to say the least."

Even Batty was now impressed. The link between Captain Webb and the Percy gang, provided by no less a person than Percy himself, put a rather different complexion on the affair. Miss Watkin's story could be dismissed as the figment of a distorted imagination. Even Martha's suspicions could be put down to a rustic desire to gossip. But when these suspicions were added to their knowledge of the red-faced Percy, and the fact that he had visited Captain Webb, the theory that foul play had occurred did not seem so far-fetched.

They had nothing concrete to go on, for Martha had either not known or had been unwilling to give any further facts—either about Captain Webb's work for military intelligence or his connection with Percy. But as Bill pointed out, if Webb had indeed been working on the counterfeit money case and had obtained evidence—as the scrapbook seemed to indicate—then he had died at a most convenient moment for the gang.

"It's odd, certainly," said Sleepy. "And look here, we know that Webb was interested in Percy because he put his name down in that book. And what's more, he must have known that the name Smith was a blind, because he used the proper name in the scrapbook."

Batty nodded, fiddling with a pencil in an irritating fashion.

"Yes, and another thing. If what Bill says is true, and Webb was a sort of detective, then they wanted the book because they knew he had been collecting evidence against them. and that some of it, or even all of it, was in the book."

CHAPTER XII

UNNATURAL DEATH

THOUGH the whole affair sounded like the plot of a blood and thunder thriller, there was no getting away from the fact that the evidence they had so far obtained—though it was highly circumstantial—fitted very neatly into place. The correlation of the various reports, including Batty's, could really allow of only one explanation. As Batty pointed out, some of the details might be wrong, and in any case at such an early stage theories were of necessity rough and ready; nevertheless, it was possible to evolve a sort of general explanation of events. There were one of two facts which simply would not fit in, but this did not prove that Batty's theory was incorrect; no doubt later on these seemingly irrelevant items would slip into place easily enough.

The first premise was that a gang of counterfeiters were working in the Cumberland and Westmorland districts. This was proved, though the theory that Percy Hubbard & Co. were connected with that gang was still open to possible doubt. At least, it was not proved up to the hilt, though the circumstantial evidence was very strong. According to Batty's theory, however, Percy, his friend rat-face, Wythes, Brooks and Trant were all mixed up with the gang. It was impossible to say who was the leading light, and it was quite likely that somebody still unknown was running the show. Captain Webb, investigating the case on his own, had accumulated evidence which would have been fatal to the crooks if it had ever been communicated to the authorities. At least part of this evidence was contained in the shabby little scrapbook, and probably this was of more importance than it appeared to be to the boys, who after all had little

experience in such matters. Captain Webb had therefore been murdered and several attempts made to gain possession of the book ; three attempts in fact, including the first effort to buy it at the sale, prevented by reason of the accident at Great Kirkin. The gang in the meantime was continuing its nefarious practices, though it was impossible to guess where its headquarters lay, from what source the counterfeit notes were distributed and who were the agents for the purpose of circulating them.

Batty was very emphatic in proposing that Study 6 should give its attention to these important matters and not trouble the police any further. Study 6 were only too ready to listen to reason. After all, they had not an atom of proof that any of the suspects were indeed connected with the gang ; even less proof that Captain Webb had been murdered.

"What's more," Batty had said, "the great thing is to get the chaps at the top. Arrest the small fry, and the others, the ones that really matter, take to their heels. We've just got to carry on."

It was quite amusing to hear Batty laying down the law in this fashion, as if he had at his disposal a world-wide detective organisation. Just the same, Batty was a boy with a brain, and Study 6 had never been known to hang back when excitement was in the offing.

For some time they discussed other aspects of the case, trying, unsuccessfully, to fit into the general framework the apparently irrelevant items. There was the little matter of Farmer Wythes and his birds. Batty had reported his own adventures on that Sunday afternoon, but it really got them no further. Why Trant should have visited the farm so stealthily, what business he could have had in the shed, supposing that Batty was right and he had indeed entered it and no other, it was impossible even to guess. It was likely that the birds mentioned in the conversation on the bridge, overheard by Sleepy and Feathers, had been those seen by Batty in the farmer's shed. This theory, however, explained nothing. The only explanation they could think of was that Farmer Wythes had in that instance been engaged in honest business and that the conversation had had nothing whatever to do with the counterfeit note affair. That he was linked with the gang, however, was now certain ; Feathers had overheard a most suspicious conversation between Wythes and

Percy in the caravan, a conversation which allowed of no other possibility.

Feathers, who was something of a chemist, finding this accomplishment a useful aid in his researches, had undertaken an analysis of the powders discovered by Batty in the butler's room. The result was not particularly satisfactory, for the naturalist reported that he was beaten. He had discovered that the basic constituent of each powder was chalk, but beyond that his researches had taken him nowhere. The analysis required rather more skill than he possessed.

One important decision was reached that same Sunday evening. The appointment made for the following Friday night on Humstone Fell, situated some five miles from Bracken, presented the amateur detectives with a golden opportunity—and one which on no account must be missed. It was no easy thing to break out of the house after lock-up, nor was it an offence to be lightly undertaken. The authorities frowned more than somewhat on such an adventure. Just the same, it was necessary that on that particular night Farmer Wythes should be kept under observation. An interview of more than ordinary importance was fixed for that night at ten o'clock, an interview which, according to Percy himself, was concerned with a stack of money. It being extremely likely that vital information could be acquired by being present at Humstone Fell the following Friday night at ten o'clock, Study 6 unanimously decided to chance the consequences and be there.

It was agreed, however, that as there was no reason for them all to take the risk, and as in any case the chance of discovery would be multiplied if all four broke out, only two should undertake the adventure. Humstone Fell being some distance from Bracken, the motor-bike would be essential, and as this could accommodate only two at a time, this was yet another reason why the number of bounds breakers should be limited. Competition being keen, lots were drawn, the lucky ones being Bill and Batty.

Thus were matters left, Study 6 having to face the prospect of nearly five monotonous days. Little in the way of detective work could be undertaken during the middle of the week, the week-end providing the best opportunity. It was sickening to have to settle down to humdrum routine for days on end, but as they went to bed on the Sunday night

there seemed no other prospect. True, they could possibly manage to keep an eye on Trant during the following days, but it was unlikely that anything of interest would accrue from what must inevitably be haphazard observation. Detectives, they felt, ought not to be circumscribed in this narrow way by school routine, but as it was certain that the authorities would not view the situation quite in that light, all they could do was to lump it. One thing they did attend to on the Monday morning—the precious book was carefully packed up and deposited in the housemaster's safe. Pieface was not a bad sort, take him all round, and made no bones about it.

"Looking after a family heirloom, eh?" he demanded, balancing the small parcel in his hand.

"Something like that, sir," replied Batty, unmoved. Nevertheless, he breathed a sigh of relief when the book was safely stowed away.

"I only trust that you have not added burglary to your other crimes," continued Pieface pleasantly, turning the key in the massive lock. "I refuse to be a receiver of stolen goods," he added.

Batty smiled dutifully, making his exit without giving anything away. So that was that, and Study 6 settled down to tick off the days as patiently as they might. As it turned out, however, the period of inactivity was by no means lacking in interest. On Tuesday evening Bill went up to the Honey Pot to see how the hens were getting on. He returned with a long face, reporting that after laying well for several days they had suddenly and unaccountably begun to lose interest in their work. Of the forty, at least eight were definitely off colour and the others were not very spry.

"You're telling us," said Batty brutally, when the sad news was conveyed to him. "I always knew something would go wrong with that precious scheme of yours."

"But I can't understand it," said Bill. "They were perfectly all right yesterday, Miss Gough says. There's something fishy going on."

Study 6 quite agreed, but their interpretation of what it was that was fishy was not quite the same as Bill's. In their opinion, Bill had hatched a cracked-brained scheme.

Wednesday brought even worse news from the Honey Pot. During the night three hens quietly laid themselves to



"There's something queer going on," he said.

rest, to a long and enduring rest unbroken by the dawn. Their work was done, their travail o'er, so to speak. On Thursday six more joined their companions beyond Styx, and during the afternoon another ten dropped off their perches and gave up the struggle.

"But why?" demanded Bill aggressively. "Why?" he added, in case Miss Gough had not heard the question.

That lady shrugged her shoulders vaguely and helplessly. They were standing outside the chicken runs at the Honey Pot, staring hopelessly at the vacated coops.

"Old Wythes never had any trouble with his," continued Bill, looking across at Peartree Farm, which laying next door to the Honey Pot could plainly be seen.

"I expect it's just in the nature of things," said Miss Gough. "Hens do have queer diseases, I know. Never mind, Bill, you did your best. Only I'm afraid I can't carry on with poultry, because I can't afford to spend more money buying new birds."

Bill felt as if he could have committed suicide. There was every reason for remorse, because if it had not been for him, Miss Gough would not have spent her precious capital in purchasing the birds.

"I'm terribly sorry," he said, and found matters were made no better by Miss Gough refusing to blame him.

To hide his embarrassment he turned to the runs and opened the door of one of them.

"There's something queer going on," he said. "Give me a hand with this," he added to Sleepy who had accompanied him to the Honey Pot. "I'm going to get Feathers to have a look at this chap."

He hauled one of the corpses from the run, tucked it under his arm, and made for the two-stroke. It was in any case necessary to have the bike close at hand for the following night's work, and with a bit of luck it would not be discovered in the shed on the junior ground. Apart from that, Bill was in no humour to worry about risks. Sleepy reluctantly took charge of the deceased fowl, hanging on to it grimly as Bill sent the motor-bike charging down the lane towards Bracken. With its head dangling limply and disconsolately in the wind, the hen made its last sad journey towards the operating table.

With the motor-bike safely and secretly stowed away in

the shed, the two boys made their surreptitious way to the study. Though there was no rule, to their knowledge, against carrying dead hens through the school precincts, it was as well, in their judgment, to conceal the corpse from prying eyes. Arrived at Study 6 they found Feathers quite agreeable to undertaking the post-mortem. Such work was actually his idea of heaven, and with a blissful expression he prepared the study table for its mournful burden, drawing out his knives and other implements with loving care. Nebuchadnezzar, who was accustomed to his master's strange habits, sat on the corner of the table and watched with keen interest, an interest shared only by Bill. The others, on various pretexts, left the study until the more gruesome parts of the operation had been completed. Bill, however, with tragic mien, folded his arms and watched with something of the expression which must have distinguished Napoleon when examining the reasons for his defeat at Waterloo.

For twenty minutes Feathers worked steadily, withdrawing certain organs from the body of the fowl and carefully sealing them in glass jars. This completed, he picked up the jars and made his way to the lab. He had permission to use this room out of hours, the senior chemistry master being almost human, and being interested in the hobby which was the delight of the naturalist.

"How long?" demanded Bill briefly.

"Can't say," replied Feathers. "Only for goodness sake relax. I'm doing all I can."

His manner was exactly like that of a surgeon consoling the relative of a patient. Bill began pacing the study—an exercise which he did not cease until Feathers returned. By that time Sleepy and Batty had also come back, so that the announcement, which, as it turned out, was to have a bearing on the Percy affair, was received by them all.

"Well, what about it?" demanded Bill.

"I'm not absolutely certain," replied Feathers. "But if that bird died a natural death, I'll eat my hat."

Bill, of course, was not surprised. He had, he informed them, felt it in his bones from the very start. The others, however, looked blank. If Feathers said the bird had not died a natural death, then it had not; but for the life of them they could not understand why anybody should have had ulterior designs on the hens.

"It's a bit queer," continued Feathers. "You remember when Cuthbert died? Well, I was sure he was poisoned, though I didn't know how, nor what poison was used. I've found exactly the same symptoms in this hen. A large quantity of chalk, and traces of some sort of bromide. At least, I should guess it's bromide."

Batty looked up quickly. It seemed ridiculous at first sight that the hen's death could be connected, however remotely, with the affair of the forged banknotes; and yet the remark about the chalk had definitely rung a bell in Batty's brain.

"Did you say chalk?" he enquired. "What about those powders you analysed—the one's I took from Trant's room. I mean?"

"Yes, I know. I had thought of that." Feathers was frowning thoughtfully. "As a matter of fact," he added, "I had a look at them again just now. When I analysed them before, I had no suspicion that there might be a bromide mixed up with the chalk, but having got the idea, I tested specially. It's easier when you know what you're looking for, of course."

"And did you find anything?"

"Yes, I found the same traces. In other words, it's almost a certainty that the powders you found in Trant's room were used to poison the hens, and, incidentally, Cuthbert as well."

CHAPTER XIII

ON HUMSTONE FELL

THE expedition to Humstone Fell took place without Study 6 having arrived at any plausible theory to account for Trant's seemingly aimless habit of poisoning hens and weasels. Batty, more for something to do than because he really thought that the butler's hobby might have been the reason for his mysterious visit to Peartree on the previous Sunday afternoon, made it his business to make tactful enquiries of Wythes regarding the health of his birds.

"Haven't got any now," replied the farmer briefly. "Got rid of them some time ago."

Batty, who had forgotten that Peartree had abandoned poultry, blinked his eyes.

"But surely I....."

At that point he stopped himself. Until he was sure that Wythes was deliberately concealing the fact that he was in possession of some half-dozen birds, he did not want to say anything to put the man on his guard. After a few more remarks there was no doubting that Wythes, who could certainly not have forgotten that he had the fowls, had every intention of keeping that fact hidden. Batty retraced his steps to Bracken thoughtfully. Whether Trant had intended to tamper with the birds or not, it was becoming clear that the owner of Peartree had some reason for keeping it very dark that he was housing them. Coupled with two other facts—the overheard conversation by the river and the closely locked door of the shed wherein were contained the birds—this, Batty decided, was significant; though in what manner he was at a loss to understand. Why on earth should anybody wish to hide possession of six harmless birds? Why, come to that, should a criminal gang have any interest in them? As was obvious from the fact that Wythes had been instructed by rat-face to take delivery of them after dark. It was by no means the least mysterious item of a mysterious affair.

One other aspect of the business, of even more sinister import, struck Batty as he walked into the study in time for prep. So horrid a thought made him pull up short, his face a picture of moody contemplation.

"What's bitten you?" demanded Bill, looking up from teasing Nebuchadnezzar.

"It's only an idea," replied Batty slowly, "but have you realised that we've come across the poison motive twice in this case? Once in connection with animals and once rather less harmlessly. Captain Webb, I mean."

"We don't know he was poisoned," was the answer to this, but Batty only shook his head impatiently.

"We don't know it was poison any more than we know he was murdered. But if he was murdered, then it's odds on it was poison. If it had been anything else it would have been spotted."

Feathers banged a Latin dictionary down on the table with a thump.

"So what?" he demanded, "what are you getting at?"

"Only that as we've already got proof that Trant messes about with poisons, it's not impossible that he might have been responsible for Captain Webb's death," said Batty. "Only it's not a very pleasant thought."

It certainly was not; in fact, so unpleasant was it that instinctively Study 6 ran away from it. No direct answer was given to Batty's theory, but the fact that the conversation was turned to other topics was as good as an answer. Study 6 had no wish to probe too deeply; the solution of that particular problem might be one they had no wish to discover. For the first time they began to have a glimmering of what they had taken on. Vaguely discussing the possibility of murder having been committed was one thing; to suspect, and with some circumstantial evidence to back up that suspicion, that a person who shared one's own roof might be responsible for murder was quite another. It brought it home rather too drastically. Study 6 decided to forget about it, though this was easier said than done as they all discovered.

Apart from this instinctive desire to avoid the logical and unpleasant conclusion which Batty's theory, if correct, would lead them to, there was another cogent reason why Study 6 should have other things on their minds. To-night was the night of the Humstone Fell expedition; an expedition not only fraught with dangers and difficulties, but holding also the possibility of discovering something of real importance. That Percy and Wythes, in fixing the rendezvous were up to something shady there could be no possible, probable shadow of doubt; but what the shadiness consisted of was a problem which could be solved in one way only—the hard way. Hard, because it was by no means either easy or safe to break bounds at night, especially during the summer term, when it was never really dark.

Bill and Batty, however, the lucky—or unlucky—drawers of the lots, professed to have no misgivings. The two-stroke, undiscovered during the day on the junior ground was their first mecca; once aboard the lugger, so to speak, if the girl was not theirs, at least comparative safety was ensured. Recognition would then be almost impossible.

The hour fixed for the rendezvous was unusually awkward, for it entailed breaking bounds almost immediately after prep. was over. Humstone Fell would take at least three-quarters-of-an-hour to reach, including the walk to the junior ground to pick up the bike; this meant leaving

Parson's by just after nine o'clock, by no means an easy proposition. At that hour, seniors were still strolling about the grounds, and if they rarely penetrated as far as the junior ground, Batty and Bill would have to run the gauntlet in order to reach the haven where they would be. Being seniors themselves, their presence would not be questioned, so long as they kept to the usual tracks. The trouble would arise when they slipped across the road to the junior ground.

Luck, however, was with them that night. They reached the shed wherein reposed the two-stroke, without incident. Call-over taking place much earlier in the evening, their only risk now lay in the other two failing to head off any awkward enquiries in Parson's itself. That matter being outside their present scope, they mounted the bike fatalistically. At all events they would climb Humstone Fell; for the rest, it could jolly well lump it. That, be it said, was the spirit which conquered continents and drove adventurers across uncharted seas!

Humstone Fell rose, a rugged slope across which ran a rough, narrow road, some five miles from Bracken. From its upper slopes one could obtain a fine view over Windermere, in the other direction, peak after peak rising in majesty to the horizon. Uncertain where on the Fell the appointment was to take place, Bill drove circumspectly as they approached. It was as well that he did so, for a huge car swung round the bend in the road, going in the same direction as the bike, and nearly ditched it and proceeded at speed.

Batty muttered under his breath, but found time to wonder at Bill's reticence. Such incidents, by no means unusual when Bill was driving, nine times out of ten evoked bitter comments—especially when, as in this case, the fault was not Bill's. This time, however, Bill said nothing, but sent the bike at its best speed in the wake of the car.

"That's the car that ditched me above Great Firkin," he yelled over his shoulder.

Batty licked his lips. Things were beginning to work up towards a climax, of that he was confident. It began to look as if the rendezvous fixed by Percy with Wythes was of more importance than they had dared to hope. The car, as Batty had been vouchsafed time to observe, had been driven by neither Percy nor rat-face; the driver had been a black-avised individual whom Batty had never seen before. If Percy and

Wythes were also going to keep the appointment, it seemed more than likely that it was a meeting either of the whole gang or of a substantial part of it.

Two miles farther up the road things began to happen. The large car had long since disappeared from sight, but as they approached a side track which cut across the rough scrub, they were astonished to see no fewer than four other cars proceeding slowly along the track. Even as Bill slowed down at the junction, yet another car, coming from down the Fell, turned up the track. The moon was hardly visible, but the night was by no means pitch dark, though cars were using their headlights. These, although more than ever necessary when crossing the scrub, were turned out by each car in turn as it left the road for the track.

"What on earth is happening?" asked Bill, stopping the bike and instinctively turning off all its lights.

"I give it up," replied Batty, slipping off the pillion, "unless all these blokes are members of the gang. Only that just doesn't make sense."

While they waited at the junction, one more car overtook them and turned up the track. After that, for nearly fifteen minutes silence reigned supreme over the Fell. Tensely Bill and Batty waited for something to happen; unfortunately nothing whatever rewarded their vigil. At last Bill, who was a poor hand at waiting, turned to Batty.

"It's no good hanging about here," he said. "I vote we go up that track and see what's going on."

Accordingly they hid the bike behind some bushes, and then walked cautiously up the track. It was an eerie walk. Not knowing what they might come upon, it was undertaken for the most part in silence, broken now and again by a warning exclamation from one or the other as they fancied they could see something stirring ahead or hear something moving. They walked in this fashion for the best part of a mile, until suddenly the track turned sharply and ended abruptly. Cautiously exploring they found that it had petered out in an open, grassy glade. Four hundred yards away, across the open land, lights shone.

Batty's muttered exclamation was not necessary. Bill could see for himself that some dozen cars were drawn up in a rough circle, their headlights directed inwards. Forming

an inner circle they could presently discern the shadowy figures of people.

"Come on," whispered Bill, dropping to the ground.

Wriggling and crawling, often stopping with their hearts in their mouths, the two proceeded towards the circle of blazing light. They were forced to stop some hundred yards from their objective, for there a bush offered shelter ; beyond it was nothing but open land, affording no protection. To go on was to invite discovery.

For five minutes they lay there, peering across the intervening space, trying to distinguish what attraction held the little crowd so thickly round the lights. These, trained on the ground, revealed only the stooping figures of the men—there seemed to be no women—but revealed nothing of what was taking place in their midst. The crowd was by no means noisy ; in fact they seemed to be doing their best to avoid any commotion. When, as occasionally happened a voice was raised in a shout, it ceased abruptly, as if its owner had clapped a hand to his mouth. Wriggling over to Bill, Batty put his mouth to his ear.

"What's going on ?" he whispered, "a football match or something ?"

Bill shook his head helplessly. The silent tenseness of the crowd, their enthrallment and furtiveness combined to give a sinister atmosphere to the proceedings. But what was going on inside the ring of spectators neither Bill nor Batty could even guess at. Whether Wythes and Percy were there they did not know ; whether their mysterious rendezvous had anything or nothing to do with this other mysterious meeting they could only surmise. Bill's own theory that Percy and Wythes and possibly other members of the gang were meeting here either to discuss matters generally or else to distribute counterfeit notes, was blown to the winds. If the crowd they were watching were members of the counterfeiters' gang, then they had queer ways of going to work !

At this point, Batty pulled Bill's arm and began wriggling away to his right. Thinking that he was going to attempt a circuit of the glade, Bill followed. He was wrong, however, for after they had proceeded some yards, getting gradually farther away from the crowd, Batty waited for him.

"There's somebody over there," he said, pointing. "I

don't know what he's up to, but I think he's a scout of some sort. We'll have a look at him."

Following the pointed finger, Bill could just make out a shadowy figure slipping behind a bush. Unperceived by the crowd, who were intent on their own affairs, the movement was plain enough to the intruders. Of one thing Bill felt quite certain; whoever it was had about as much business there as they had themselves, for his movements were as furtive as their own. He was, Bill decided, certainly not a scout or look-out.

Carefully they wriggled towards the bush. When they were still twenty yards from it, the figure broke cover, and bending low, began to run. Making for the track where it came into the glade, he sped along, Bill and Batty in chase. It was as they came to the beginning of the track that it happened, with a suddenness that took their breath away. One moment they were chasing along intent on their quarry; the next that quarry suddenly turned hunter. Stopping in his tracks, where a curve hid the glade from view, he calmly awaited the coming of Bill and Batty.

They, running too hard to stop, found themselves grasped by hands which seemed at first contact to be made of tempered steel.

"And now," said a voice, "you can just give an account of yourselves."

CHAPTER XIV

SCOTLAND YARD TAKES OVER

TO say that Bill and Batty were surprised is to put it mildly. Surprise at the sudden turning of the worm was no less than the utter astonishment at the tone of his voice. To be called upon to give an account of themselves was, in the circumstances, more than enough to leave them gasping. Amazement was increased, though it brought elucidation with it, at the man's next words.

"I'm a police officer," he added, "and I warn you that anything you may say will be taken down and may be used as evidence against you."

For once in his life Bill was bereft of speech. Things like this, he told himself, just did not happen. Unfortunately,



The figure broke cover, and bending low, began to run.

in this instance it had happened. Pulling his victims unresistingly behind the cover of a bush, the man flashed a torch on their faces. His voice, when he had taken in the details of their extremely youthful features, expressed keen disappointment.

"Kids!" he said, and, though he left it at that, the implication was enough to loosen Bill's tongue.

"I like that! You may be surprised to know that we've been doing your job for you just the same."

Though it was too dark to be sure, they both felt rather than saw the smile on the man's lips.

"Come on," he said, "we'd better be getting out of this. Follow me and don't make a noise."

Stumbling and tripping over the uneven ground they followed him for about a mile in silence. Cutting across the track up which they had previously walked, they eventually came out on the Humstone Fell road considerably nearer to Bracken. Tucked away behind some bushes was a black, efficient-looking police car.

"If you don't mind," said Inspector Shirley, "we'll get down to Bracken. There are quite a few things I want to ask you."

Bill hesitated. The game was obviously up, as far as their desire to play a lone hand in the case was concerned, and though the inspector had phrased his remark courteously, it was nevertheless an order; just the same, there was the two-stroke to be thought about, still secreted some half a mile up the road. Bill had no wish to leave it there all the night. When this point was explained, Shirley grinned.

"You seem to have been doing things in style," he said, "and breaking about every school rule in the calendar at the same time. Still, I suppose I'll have to come in with you. I'll send a man up for the bike."

Ten minutes later they were seated in the tiny room which Huthwaite, the village sergeant, used as an office in his cottage. Huthwaite himself was occupied in tramping up the Fell to retrieve the bike, a proceeding which, to judge by his expression, he did not find to his liking. Now, with Inspector Shirley quizzing them from the other side of the desk, the day of reckoning had come. Neither Bill nor Batty felt too comfortable; the warning delivered by Feathers as to the reactions of the police if and when it came out that

Study 6 had taken to themselves the duties of the guardians of the law had been disregarded at the time. They both wished now that they had paid more heed to it. Shirley looked a decent enough sort of man, but they realised that if they had been in his place, confronted with two boys who had concealed information, and had then more or less led the police on a wild goose chase, they would have been feeling more than a little piqued. Though their ideas about the penalties for concealing information, or contempt of court, or however else the crime was catalogued, were vague, Bill and Batty felt decidedly uncomfortable.

"Now, let's have your story," said the Inspector, lighting his pipe and blowing great clouds to the ceiling. "I take it, by the way, that you," pointing to Batty, "are the one who gave Huthwaite some information not long ago?"

Batty admitted the soft impeachment. He had evidently misjudged Huthwaite, for instead of sitting back and doing nothing, the sergeant had obviously set things in motion, as witness the arrival of a Scotland Yard detective in the person of Inspector Shirley.

"I've got your statement here," continued the detective, turning over the papers on his desk. "Hm, yes, seems all in order," he said, running through the typed sentences. "Now, if you wouldn't mind bringing it up to date it might be a help. And by the way, please don't leave anything out. I want the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth."

He smiled pleasantly as he spoke, but there was no doubting the decision behind the words. He meant to wring them dry of every scrap of information in their possession.

"I'll jot it down in shorthand," he said, "and then I'll get you to sign the statement afterwards. Begin at the beginning and proceed in a straight line to the end," he added. "There are too many people in this world who will persist in starting either at the end or the middle," he explained.

Bill, by means of mental telegraph, signalled to Batty to do the explaining. He felt that his friend would make a better job of it than he would himself. Batty, therefore, took a deep breath and started in.

Taking the Inspector's advice to heart, he began at the beginning, explaining that it would be better to recapitulate the statement he had previously made to the sergeant. He detailed, therefore, the various incidents that had occurred

since Bill's purchase of the two-stroke, bringing the tale right up to the moment when they had been surprised on Humstone Fell by the Inspector. He did not forget, either, to summarise the theories and conclusions these incidents had led them to adopt. He told Shirley of Bill's encounter with Percy above Great Firkin, of the purchase of the books, of Percy's attempt to buy them, and the passing of the forged note. He also explained how the one book had been retained by accident and how an attempt had been made to obtain it by violence. When he mentioned how Sleepy and Feathers had discovered that the scrapbook had not been sold to Percy, Shirley interrupted.

"And you're sure this man Brooks was present when the discovery was made?"

"Certain," replied Batty. "That's what made us think he might have arranged the robbery. Only, of course, he didn't know Sleepy had given Feathers the wrong book, and that Feathers had the scrapbook and Sleepy the notebook."

Shirley motioned him to continue after he had digested this information. Batty therefore carried on, detailing the contents of the mysterious scrapbook. Thus the lengthy tale continued, until the Scotland Yard man was in possession of all the facts. He knew about Trant and his mysterious visit to Peartree; of the strange looking birds Batty had seen there; of the butler's habit of brewing poisons which he subsequently administered, as they supposed, to the hens. Bill's adventures at Great Firkin, when he had listened to Martha's suspicions regarding Captain Webb's death were explained, the recital ending with the overheard conversation at the caravan and the reasons for Bill and Batty being present on Humstone Fell.

When Batty had finished there was a silence lasting some minutes. Inspector Shirley sat there examining the notes he had made of Batty's statement, sucking his now empty pipe thoughtfully.

"Can you make anything of it, sir?" enquired Bill at last. His original discomfort had by now somewhat worn off. Shirley had made no reference as yet to their failure to inform the authorities of what they had discovered, and in fact seemed to be quite a friendly sort of chap.

"Well, that's a bit difficult to say," he now replied. "I suppose you're just about bursting with curiosity? Just so—but I'm not quite sure how much to tell you."



"Do you know anything about cockfighting?" he asked.

There was a pause, broken by Shirley getting up and planting himself in front of the gas fire, which in spite of the season was necessary so late at night.

"Frankly, I'm in a bit of a quandary," he said. "If I tell you nothing, you'll naturally be even more curious and probably rush about the place shouting your heads off, which is the last thing I want. If I give you a sort of general idea of what it's all about, you may still talk and put certain people on their guard. Look here, if I do satisfy your curiosity to a certain extent, have I your word that you'll keep your mouths shut? You can tell those two friends of yours, of course, but not a soul otherwise. Have I your promise?"

This was given readily enough. As Bill pointed out, they had kept their own investigations a dead secret, and were not likely to do anything at this juncture to upset things. Shirley seemed satisfied, for after a quick, shrewd glance at first Bill and then Batty, which gave them both the impression that he was summing them up, detachedly and appraisingly, he began to speak.

"Do you know anything about cock-fighting?" he asked.

"Not a thing," replied Batty, "except that it was rather a beastly sport and was made illegal donkey's years ago."

It seemed that his information was correct as far as it went, but it did not go far enough. Cock-fighting, one of the sports of Merry England, though made illegal nearly a hundred years ago, owing to the extreme cruelty of the pastime, was by no means dead. It still flourished in certain parts of the country, especially in the rural areas of Cumberland and Westmorland. Cock-fighting mains, which consisted of several pairs of birds fighting each other, were still furtively and secretly held, quite large sums of money being wagered on the results.

Batty looked at Bill and Bill looked at Batty. Here was food for thought. The mystery of the birds at Peartree, those strange looking cocks which Batty had seen and which Trant had so mysteriously visited, was cleared up. They were fighting-cocks, being held in readiness for the main staged on Humstone Fell. Bill suddenly felt very glad that he had not been able to see exactly what was going on within the ring of spectators that night; it was bad enough imagining the cocks tearing each other to pieces, without having seen the main in actual progress.

"These men you have told me about," said the Inspector,

"Wythes, Brooks, Trant and the other two, are, of course mixed up in running these mains. No doubt they make large sums of money out of it—the farmers and others up here who frequent them are pretty reckless in wagering. And I've no doubt that the various fights are staged so that the promoters always come out on the right side. So far so good."

"But surely," broke in Batty, "that can't be right. Cock-fighting may be illegal, but it's a trivial sort of crime compared with counterfeiting, isn't it? We know these people are mixed up with that, and surely they wouldn't trouble about messing about with cock-fighting?"

Shirley smiled, looking at Batty with a quizzical expression.

"Clever," he said at last, "quite clever. As a matter of fact, that's exactly what is worrying me. Like you I struck two trails when I started investigating this forged note case—one led me to the gang I believe is behind the racket, and the other led me to the same gang, only this time I discover they're operating cock-fighting mains. And, quite honestly, I can't work it out. It's possible, of course, that they are working two rackets—cock-fighting and dud notes. But I can't help feeling that actually the two are linked. Only I'm hanged if I can see how."

He went on to tell them the evidence against the gang on both charges was nearly complete, but not quite. That night, of course, Shirley could have had the crowd on Humstone rounded up quite easily, but that would almost certainly have entailed the escape of the important members of the counterfeiting gang, who were probably not present at the main. The Inspector's job was not merely to break up the gang but to put behind bars the leaders. It was also necessary to discover all that was possible about the methods of working the racket. He had a hunch that the cock-fighting and the forging of bank notes were linked, the one depending in some way on the other.

"It's tricky," he continued, "because I dare not wait too long in case the gang gets the wind up and breaks up of its own accord. But I badly want to know exactly what goes on at these mains. The problem is to decide how long to wait before pulling the gang in. A bit longer, I think, in case I manage to get a man planted inside one of the mains. Only it's not easy, as you can imagine. Everybody concerned keeps the whole business as dark as possible, and only people who

get a chance of going are friends of accepted members, friends who can be vouched for."

Batty wanted to know who was behind the gang, who supplied the brains, but Shirley shook his head. He had, he told them, suspicions, but these were not sufficient—proof was required.

"I have to be sure before I move," he said, "and I have to get my hands on the man behind it all. That's another reason why I've got to wait for a bit. Only by waiting I stand the chance of losing the lot, whereas if I strike now I shall at any rate get hold of some of the small fry. It's a dog's life, a policeman's," he added.

He told them that the evidence they had now supplied would be of the utmost value, and took the opportunity of impressing two things on them—the necessity of going to the police as soon as any further information came their way, and the urgency of keeping their mouths shut.

"From now on, my sons, you just leave it to me," he smiled, though this only cloaked a definite order. "I've more or less been forced to tell you what I have, I don't mind saying, and I haven't liked doing it. But if anything you do messes the case up, I'll come to Bracken and wring your necks with my own bare hands."

The mention of the school brought Batty and Bill back to a sense of reality. With some trepidation they mentioned the fact that they were out of bounds, after lock-up, and could expect various unpleasant things to happen to them if this came out.

The inspector smiled, his eyes twinkling. In view of the assistance they had given, he told them, he would promise not to give them away unless it became really necessary.

"Which I'm sure it won't," he added. "You'd better drop that scrapbook in here to-morrow morning. I'd like to have a look at it, though from what you've told me there's not much doubt that Captain Webb had a line on the crooks. I imagine your theory is correct, and that the messages all referred to cock-fighting mains. That was the method they used to inform clients that a main was to take place. And no doubt the place names were in code, so that York, for instance, really meant Humstone Fell and so on. Obviously the gang thought that in the hands of the authorities the cuttings, being collected together, would give the game away."

This provided an opening for Bill, who had been turning a query over in his mind for some time.

"About Captain Webb, sir. What I mean is . . ."

"Ah, yes, about Captain Webb," repeated the inspector. "Well, I can tell you this. He often gave us a hand, and his death was perfectly natural. That's quite certain."

Bill breathed a sigh of relief. He had never had any particular feeling for Trant, but it was definitely a relief to know that the butler had not been guilty of what he had at one time feared—murder.

"It's a pity about Trant," said Shirley. "I don't suppose the school wants a scandal, and unless it turns out that he's mixed up with the counterfeiting we may not have to push a case against him. I'm pretty sure that he's only concerned with the cock-fighting part of the business. The dud note he passed on you probably came from one of the other beauties. Trant possibly suspected what was going on, but I don't think he had anything to do with the forgeries."

They had already gathered that the habitués of the mains were in complete ignorance of the fact that the promoters were concerned in worse crimes; they also realised from the Inspector's remarks that the gang itself was probably split into two sections—those who were connected only with the cock-fighting and a smaller number directly implicated in the counterfeiting and distributing of the banknotes. It was something to know that Trant was innocent of the last offence.

Huthwaite having by this time returned with the two-stroke, Bill and Batty prepared to return to the school. They were under promise not to say a word to anybody but Feathers and Sleepy concerning the night's adventures, nor indeed, of anything connected with the case. Shirley, himself, was, so to speak, under cover; he was in plain-clothes and none knew of his presence—or, rather, of his real identity. Study 6 had also been pledged to report to Huthwaite any further information coming their way.

As they climbed on the bike, preparatory to leaving the sergeant's cottage, Batty glared at Bill.

"I'd still like to know what Trant was up to with those powders," he said.

"Would you?" replied Bill. "That's easy, only I'm too tired to tell you tonight."

With which he climbed back into the saddle, the roar of the engine drowning Batty's urgent request to explain his last remark.

CHAPTER XV

SLEEPY MAKES A DISCOVERY

"SO that's that," said Batty, drawing to the end of his lengthy report on the previous night's adventures. "There's forgery going on and cock-fighting, some of the beauties we've been watching being mixed up with one side of the racket, some with the other, and one or two, probably, with both. Take your choice."

Study 6 turned over the information imparted, with interest but not much relish. It was all very well to have had their suspicions confirmed, to have it on no less an authority than that of a Scotland Yard detective that they had actually got on the track of a criminal gang; but that was rather less than nothing compared with the undoubted fact that they had been warned off the grass, forbidden to tamper in the case any further. The golry of bringing the crooks to justice was not to be theirs; not for them the valiant part of David versus Goliath. It was disappointing to have got so far and be prevented from proceeding farther.

"Wythes, I should say," continued Batty, "like Trant, is mixed up with the cock-fighting but has nothing to do with the dud notes. But Percy and his pal rat-face, are certainly up to their necks in both rackets."

For nearly an hour they discussed the various aspects of the case; Shirley's conviction that Webb had died a natural death—a fact which they could do nothing but accept; the strange chances which had put them on the track of the gang; and by no means least, Trant's mysterious behaviour, even now not fully cleared up.

"Oh, yes, and now you can spill the beans," said Batty, turning on Bill. "What about those powders?"

Bill glanced at Feathers, with whom he had that morning been discussing this matter. The naturalist took up the tale.

"I should say that Trant was trying his hand at a spot of doping," he replied. "Don't forget there's a stack of money wagered on these fights, and a main usually consists of one team matched against another. Trant, I should say,

was aiming at putting one team out of action, in order to cash in by backing the other. Unfortunately, of course, he had to experiment first, and chose Cuthbert and the hens for his subjects. Which put an end to them."

It certainly had, for by now there remained but two hens out of the original forty. Bill had said little about the affair and the others, realising that he was sick at the thought that he had wasted Miss Gough's money, had also refrained from discussing the unfortunate affair. It was really not Bill's fault in any case, for he could hardly have been expected to know that Trant would tamper with the birds. That had been a dirty trick, and Study 6 were sorry Wythes had given up his poultry, or probably his birds would then have met their deaths, instead of Miss Gough being made the victim just because she lived so near Trant's haunts.

It happened, however, that after all, Miss Gough's financial problems were solved satisfactorily. Because Bill had said nothing about the sorry affair, that did not mean that he had done nothing about it. He had written home explaining what had happened, though he made no reference to the counterfeiting affair, and had asked his father to advance him the necessary money to repay Miss Gough. On the understanding that the money would be deducted from his termly allowance—though it is to be doubted whether his father would have kept him to this for long—the cash was duly forwarded. It was not needed, however, for when Bill arrived at the Honey Pot on his errand of mercy, it was to find Miss Gough in what she called a "state."

"I don't know whether to be glad or sorry," she said, tidying her hair, which was always falling down. "Aunt Lizzie, you know," she added vaguely.

Bill, accustomed to making sense out of her apparently meaningless remarks, grasped the point at once.

"You mean she's dead?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so. Or am I glad? After all, one should be honest, shouldn't one? There's quite a lot of money, they tell me, and I can draw on some of it almost at once. It's wonderful, isn't it?"

It was, but in spite of this fortunate legacy, Bill still felt bound to suggest paying her the money he had received from home. Miss Gough would have neither part nor parcel of it.

"Nonsense, Bill. You did your best, and it was just bad!

luck. Chickens, you know, are always falling over dead, or getting ill.

So that was that, and if Bill privately thought that in this case the deaths had been far from natural, he said nothing about his suspicions. He returned to Bracken in a happier frame of mind with a weight off his conscience. Not that at this juncture Study 6 were feeling too pleased with life. Just when things had seemed to be going their way, and the counterfeit note affair working up to a nice climax, the fruits of their toil, as they chose to think, had been snatched from their eager grasp. Life would seem more than usually dull without the interest of Percy & Co. to lighten it. If, by any chance, they did drop across any further developments, they were under promise to divulge them to Huthwaite. As Bill bitterly remarked, it was no go. From now on the police could do their own work without assistance. At which, of course, Destiny laughed up her capacious sleeve; this was not at all in accordance with her plan and would not therefore happen. Even Scotland Yard, it seemed, was not immune from Destiny's whims and fancies. At the moment, however, not realising that they were under the care of that watchful lady, Study 6 ground their teeth. The scrapbook, that piece of precious, concrete evidence, was now in the safe keeping of Inspector Shirley; with its departure, life assumed a grey hue.

Nothing happened for several days, Destiny having decided to give all parties in the case a little breathing space. True, she sowed a few seeds during that time, but Study 6 were not appreciative, not knowing that they were seeds. First, Feathers, during one of his lonely expeditions in search of wild life, came across a notice advertising yet another fair, run under the auspices of that same firm which had organised the festivities on Brewery Fields. This time, however, Study 6 showed only luke-warm interest in the news. Stoup, where the fair was scheduled to take place, was some eight miles from Bracken, too far in their opinion to justify an expedition. Little did they realise in what dramatic circumstances they were to visit that gala event.

The second item which was of such vital import but passed unnoticed at the time, was Nebucadnezzar's illness. For some days he was off-colour, so that Feathers, who had recently trained the rat to live in the study during school

hours and not in his master's pocket, was forced to revert to the previous régime and cart the animal about with him.

"The beast is a pest and a nuisance," said Sleepy bitterly on more than one occasion.

He was to live to remember these words, and never was a boy so glad as he that Nebuchadnezzar had developed a pain in his tummy, or whatever other region of his body the affliction took root. But that is anticipating events. Between the Friday, Bill and Batty had explored Humstone Fell, and the following Wednesday, Study 6 were supremely bored with life.

It was immediately after lunch on that day, a half-holiday, that Destiny took matters into her own hands. Feathers, who very rarely asked for company on his naturalistic jaunts, was moved to invite Sleepy to accompany him. He had no particular objective in view, but for some reason or other suddenly decided that companionship would be pleasant. Sleepy, who had for the last few days been mooning about as if the tame ending to the Percy case had been a personal affront, agreed listlessly. Accordingly they started off about two o'clock, making their way up to the stream which ran through Vanstone's grounds. They walked for the most part in silence, though occasionally Feathers did make a remark which Sleepy as often as not did not answer. Even Feathers, usually unobservant except where his own hobby was concerned, realised that his companion had something on his mind; had been secretly worried, when he came to think about it, ever since the half-term had commenced.

That he was jumpy was proved by the fact that twice he stopped in his tracks and peered behind him.

"Did you hear anything?" he asked the first time.

"Nothing," replied Feathers briefly. "What's on your mind?"

Sleepy made no answer, but, after a few moments, walked on. Yet again he stopped some ten minutes later and peered behind him. This time, however, he said nothing, but merely stood there watching, shoulders hunched, head cocked. Again nothing disturbed the stillness of the afternoon.

It was not long after this second pause that they came upon Brooks and Vanstone. Brooks was his usual quiet, efficient self, while the doctor seemed undisturbed by any premonitions of future disaster; for it would be a disaster for him if Brooks were arrested. The man, whatever crimes

might lie at his door, was undoubtedly a wonderful companion for the blind man, the boys noticing over and over again how gentle and pleasant he was with his employer. As they now stopped and chatted with the pair, Feathers could not help feeling sorry that Fate should have been so unkind as to arrange matters that this invaluable servant and companion should be wanted for forgery. It was queer, also, to realise that Brooks, though he little knew it, was standing on the edge of a volcano, that at any moment he would be arrested for one of the worst crimes on the calendar. What would he not have given to know what the boys knew! Neither Feathers nor Batty had any idea of just how important a position in the gang Brooks occupied, but though Shirley had said nothing on that subject they both felt instinctively that it was a key position, if not the very cornerstone of the arch. It was quite on the cards that they were even now talking to the leader of the gang himself.

After chatting for a few moments about nothing in particular the two boys moved on, after promising to drop in at the house for tea if they had time.

"Unless you're going to the fair at Stoup," said the doctor with a twinkle in his eye. "But, of course, that's out of bounds, isn't it?" he added ironically.

Feather laughed. As he explained, it was not so much a disinclination to break rules as laziness that was keeping them within the confines of Bracken. As a matter of fact, he had clean forgotten that to-day was the day of the fair.

"I'm glad to know you're turning over a new leaf," was Vanstone's farewell. "Keep it up, my boys!"

As they reached the turn in the river path they looked back to see Brooks and Vanstone standing just where they had left them, the doctor staring after them with sightless eyes, Brooks regarding them steadily with a gaze that gave nothing away. Feathers felt a slight shudder run down his back as he caught that glance. He would not have cared to be in that man's power, he told himself. He was sorry that the doctor should be about to lose such a valuable companion, but the sooner Brooks was behind bars the better.

By three o'clock the sky had grown overcast and rain was beginning to fall. Within a few minutes it had assumed the dimensions of a downpour, heavy drops falling from a leaden, yellow sky. Within the confines of his master's

pocket, Neb grew restless; he hated thunder, and though not a single clap had yet been heard he could smell it on the way.

"Here, come on," said Feathers, "there's a cave up here we can shelter in."

He led the way up the steep bank near the river, towards the opening of one of the innumerable caves with which that part of the country was honeycombed. Many of them showed traces of prehistoric habitation, with crude pictures still to be discerned on the walls by those qualified to investigate. Flint implements had also been found by the score, antiquarians finding the Bracken district good hunting-ground during the summer months. Feathers, being not at all interested in matters archæological, had often used this particular cave without ever exploring its recesses. For that matter, Sleepy was also supremely uninterested in prehistoric man—he found modern man quite enough to cope with. Just the same, whereas Feathers was content to huddle in the entrance and wait for the storm to subside, Sleepy was incapable of such passiveness. A cave, in his opinion, simply shrieked aloud for exploration.

The storm lasting for some considerable time, he had plenty of opportunity to investigate. He found that after the first few yards, the roof shelved steeply down, leaving him just room to crawl. It also turned sharply, though the width of the passage—for that was all it was now—remained constant at about three feet. After proceeding like this for some thirty yards, it ended abruptly in solid rock. Sleepy grunted with disappointment and laboriously turned in the restricted space, preparatory to making his way out again. He had discovered in his mac pocket, which Destiny had with great efficiency arranged that he should carry that afternoon, a torch; this he had been using for his exploration and now clumsily dropped. As it fell it went out, entailing an irritating search in the dark. Eventually, Sleepy's groping fingers came into contact with it. He switched it on as it lay, and then gave a gasp. The rays were shining steadily downwards, but instead of lighting up the solid ground, he saw that they were reflected back. At some considerable distance below him, beneath his very feet, water was throwing the rays of the torch up.

A few minutes later, Feathers was surprised to find him-



He switched on the torch and then gave a gasp.

self being dragged, rather against his will to view Sleepy's find.

"The passage doesn't end at all," said that stalwart enthusiastically. It drops down to an underground river and there's plenty of room to squeeze under the rock wall."

Arrived at the supposed end of the passage, he shone the torch down, revealing that actually there was a narrow space between the rock wall and the end of the passage from the cave. Ten feet below, the water of a tiny river could be seen distinctly. They both remembered that a small stream did in fact proceed out of the bank some yards farther up the river, though it had never occurred to either of them to investigate its course before. The valley was full of such streams and rivulets. Now, however, Sleepy was on fire to explore properly.

There is a definite fascination about an underground river, or for that matter about anything which is buried. It did not take Sleepy long to persuade Feathers that it was their bounden duty to investigate the course of this buried stream. The torch clearly showing several hand-holds by which they could descend to the stream, and as easily retrace their steps, there was no strong objection to an investigation. Within a few moments, Sleepy was making his way gingerly down the rock, experimenting with a stone tied to the end of his belt to discover the depth of the water.

"It's all right," he shouted, "it's not more than a foot deep here."

He flashed his torch across the stream, when he had descended nearly to the level of the water, and imparted the information that beyond the further bank the passage continued.

"Buck up," he called, finding no difficulty in leaping across the water, which was not more than a couple of feet wide at this point. "I'll go on ahead," he added, suiting his action to words.

CHAPTER XVI

UNDERGROUND

GOING forward cautiously, they found that the passage made a sudden turn some thirty yards after the stream

had been crossed. Its direction thereafter, as accurately as they could judge, was towards Bracken village. Here and there were traces of the rock having been hewn, showing that parts of the passage had at one time either been cut or enlarged by artificial means. Judging by the fact that the floor was in places hollowed, as if by running water, it seemed likely that the bed of an underground stream, at one time a tributary of the one they had just crossed, had been utilised to form a passage with adequate headroom. Prehistoric man, living and hiding underground whenever possible, had no doubt originally enlarged the bed to form a more efficient shelter from his enemies. Feathers, who though he had not previously evinced any interest in antiquarian exploration, could not help feeling the fascination of the place. Æons ago, how long it was impossible to say, this rough-hewn passage had formed the hiding-place of prehistoric man. It was an awe-inspiring thought.

"Makes you feel quite funny," said Feathers, lowering his voice instinctively. "To realise that probably the last man to walk along here wore skins and painted himself with woad, I mean," he added.

Sleepy, who had stopped abruptly, bent down and picked something off the floor.

"Well, in that case tobacco was discovered rather earlier than we thought," he replied grimly. "And what's more, this prehistoric man of yours smoked Capstan!"

In the palm of his hand nestled the end of a cigarette, the butt still showing quite plainly the maker's name and the brand description.

"Come on," added Sleepy briefly, interrupting Feather's astonishment. "Only walk carefully," he said, "you never know what we might come across."

Fortunately his torch battery was nearly new, throwing a steady light down the passage. This continued for a long way, its level rising slightly. After they had progressed cautiously for about a mile, they calculated that they were only a little way from the school buildings. Though his senses were on the alert, Sleepy had still found time to think up a theory to account for the underground passage. Bracken had been founded on the site of an ancient monastery, and it seemed more than likely that it had been the hands of monks which had continued the work of prehistoric man and carved out this passage from the bed of the buried stream. In the

troubled times between the Conquest and the dissolution of the monasteries, there had been many occasions, no doubt, when a secret exit from the monastery had been invaluable. This, however, by no means explained the presence of the Capstan cigarette. Modern man had used that passage, and very recently at that. Sleepy felt a tingling down his spine; though there was not a jot of evidence in support of his wild thought, some instinct told him that they were on the eve of a tremendous discovery. That same instinct warned him of danger.

The passage ended abruptly, after they had been walking some twenty minutes, in a flight of steep steps, which reared themselves up into the gloom overhead. At the foot of the stairs was yet further evidence that the passage was still used—two hurricane lamps reposed against the wall, inspection proving that they were both almost full of oil.

Here Sleepy and Feathers paused. That they had stumbled on an important discovery there was no doubt; exactly what it portended they could only guess, but they were both willing to bet that their guesses were correct. They had proof that somewhere in the vicinity counterfeit money was being printed. The evidence that this underground passage was still used by human beings brought them at a leap to the conclusion that the gang had discovered this safe retreat and were making use of it in the obvious way—to manufacture the dud money that was being circulated all over Westmorland and Cumberland.

"Of course, it's only a guess," said Sleepy slowly. "It may turn out to be a mare's nest."

Feathers shook his head abruptly.

"Not a chance," he replied. "Look here, what do we do next? Go back and report to the police, I suppose."

"Yes, I suppose so."

The reply was definite enough even if reluctantly given. It was strange, therefore, that, within a few moments of receiving it, Feathers should be leading the way up the stone steps. Afterwards he explained that it was more than flesh and blood could resist. Here they were on the brink of what might well prove to be the final link in the case, and they were expected to retrace their steps and tamely report to Huthwaite or Shirley! Simultaneously, though without a word being exchanged, they began cautiously to climb the steps.

There were in all some twenty shallow stairs, ending at a modern, wooden door equipped with a massive lock. Stealthily Feathers put out his hand and turned the knob. The last thing he expected was for the door to submit; it was therefore with astonishment that he found it swinging open quite easily on well-oiled hinges. This first astonishment, however, was nothing compared with the further surprises that awaited them.

As the door opened it revealed a stone-walled, stone-vaulted chamber, brilliantly lit by hanging electric bulbs unshaded and dazzling to the eyes. They had barely time to take in this startling fact before a well-known voice greeted them.

"Come in, my boys, come in! Brooks will attend to the door."

Before they quite knew where they were they found themselves advancing into the room, while behind them the door closed and was locked. Even this did not suffice to wake them from the species of day-dream into which they had fallen. For there, facing them, one hand leaning on a large press, was Dr. Vanstone; Vanstone, without his thick glasses, his eyes staring at them and noting every detail of their astonished faces.

"Yes, it really is me," said the doctor, "you're not dreaming, if that's any consolation to you. Oh, yes, and before we go any farther and just in case you might contemplate any attempt to escape, I had better tell you that I am not blind, never have been blind and do not intend to become blind."

It was Sleepy who first recovered from his shock. This was only to be expected, for not only was Feathers the most intimate with Vanstone, but Sleepy himself had just witnessed what was in fact the proof of a wild suspicion which from the very first he had held. Batty, when and if he ever discovered what his twin had been holding back, would no doubt be furious; but Sleepy could not help that. The suspicion that Vanstone was not blind had at the time seemed so fantastic that he had not wished to speak of it until such time as he was sure—if that time ever came. Furthermore, Vanstone had proved himself such a good friend to Study 6 that to put the suspicion into words seemed the rankest of ingratitude. Until proof was forthcoming, Sleepy had considered that the least he could do was to hold his tongue.

On that afternoon when he had gone back up the lane and had seen Brooks examining the pound notes, Sleepy had seen something else as well—or had thought he had seen it. It had seemed to him, from a distance, as if Vanstone was also examining the notes, and although when he had arrived the doctor had been doing no such thing, Sleepy could not rid his mind of the suspicion that he had previously been using the eyes which everybody considered useless. And now he had absolute proof that his original suspicion, wild as it had seemed at the time, had been correct.

To Feathers—who had always liked Vanstone and been sorry for him—the discovery that he had been hoodwinking them, that his blindness had been a mask, came as a terrible shock. He could hardly believe his own eyes as he stared at the man. The fact that the doctor was undoubtedly the leader of the counterfeiting gang, seemed at the moment of little importance compared with the fact that he had deliberately misled Feathers regarding his blindness.

"Well, now that we've cleared that up," said Vanstone, breaking the silence, "we can make ourselves comfortable. Brooks, bring up those chairs."

The silent and efficient Brooks, who had been lurking all this time in the background, dragged forward two chairs, into which Sleepy and Feathers dropped.

"You still seem bewildered," said Vanstone. "Seeing that I have half an hour or so to spare, and as the information will in any case be of no use to you, I can do a little explaining. If you would care to listen, that is?"

"Very interesting," said Sleepy. "Go ahead, only don't kid yourself that you got away with it entirely. I guessed you weren't blind a long time ago."

"Yes, I believe you did," answered the doctor. "It was that day near Peartree, wasn't it? As a matter of fact, I did wonder whether any of you had seen me reading the paper before we first met that afternoon, and that was why I mentioned the fact that I thought my eyes were improving. As it happened, of course, you came upon us unawares later on and saw more than was good for you. But that doesn't matter now. My little experiment in making easy money is over," here, he laid his hand fondly on a large bundle of bank notes lying on a table near the printing press. "This evening the last distribution to my agents is to be made, and after that we disappear."

That the man was slightly mad, Sleepy had no doubt. Not violently insane, but with just that abnormal conceit which so often typifies the criminal. It was with obvious relish that he explained to the boys his methods of working.

"This vault lies almost immediately beneath my house," he said. "At one time, of course, the school and the house were connected, and they still are by means of underground passages. In fact, I suspect that there is quite a labyrinth of vaults and passages running under all the ground between here and the school. Most of them must be blocked up by now, however. The police, I might say, can search for a lifetime before they discover the other entrance to this particular vault, which Brooks here discovered quite by accident. We pass quite easily from my house to this private mint of ours, and keep nice and cosy all the time. The passage you came along, of course, would afford us a useful method of escape. My agents have also used it on occasions, though we have kept the secret confined to as small a circle as possible. Very clever, don't you think?"

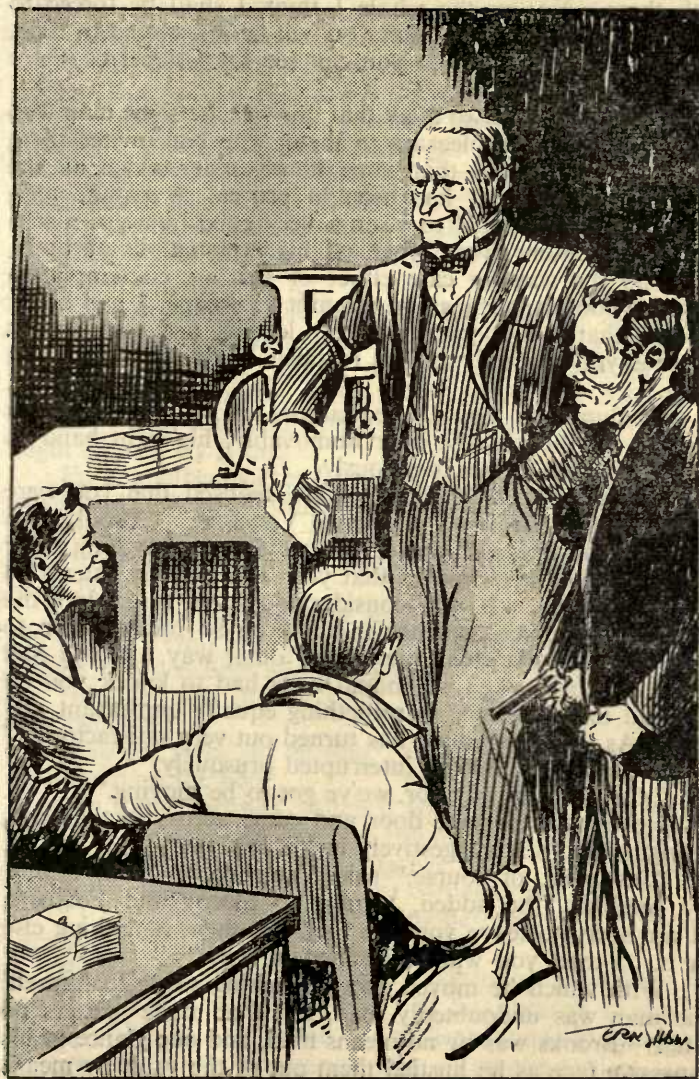
"Very, only it will land you in gaol," broke in Feathers.

Vanstone laughed softly, rubbing his hands together as if washing them with invisible soap.

"Not a bit," he said, "not a bit. By the time you have escaped from a prison that I hope will prove only temporary, we shall have scattered and be a long way from here, I trust. To-night, I may say, we make the final distribution of these beauties," stroking the pile of notes once more, "and then it will matter little if the police discover this vault. I hope they do discover it, by the way, because I understand that death by starvation is a most painful method of leaving this world."

There was a ghastly silence as his voice ceased. Desperately Sleepy told himself that things like this do not happen in twentieth century England. That it was impossible for the man to carry out his threat of leaving them helpless in this vault until they died of starvation—or were rescued, a most unlikely happening. But Vanstone's next words left him in no doubt that this was indeed his design.

"I'm sure you will understand," he said. "Nobody but yourselves know of this secret mint of mine. It would be disastrous if it were discovered before we had time to get away. Quite disastrous. I might, of course, inform the police of your whereabouts in a few days' time, but that would be risky. Scotland Yard is getting quite clever these days, and



"Death by starvation is a most painful method."

they might trace me if I were foolish enough to communicate with them. No, on the whole I think I shall be forced to leave you here and hope that you will be discovered in time. I'm sorry about it, but as you can see for yourselves, there is no alternative."

It was incredible to think that this was the same man who had always been so pleasant to them; who had invited them to his house for tea—that same house under which all the time counterfeit notes had been in process of manufacture. Vanstone, who seemed to be in a very good humour, a self-adulatory humour even, broke off his explanations abruptly.

"By the way, in case either of you are contemplating anything foolish, such as an attempt to escape, I had better tell you that this room is securely locked, and that Brooks here has you covered with his revolver, although you cannot see it."

Involuntarily they looked across at Brooks, who was standing by the passage door immovably, his right hand in a pocket which bulged ominously.

"Of course, I expect you have realised that you were followed this afternoon," continued Vanstone. "Brooks had you under his eye, just in case you were up to anything. For some time we have known that you were unduly interested in our activities. It was considerate of you to explore the passage yourselves, because it has been so much easier to deal with you like this than in any other way. If you had gone back to Bracken we should have had to knock you on the head in the woods, or something equally unpleasant and risky. As it is, everything has turned out very satisfactorily."

At this point Brooks interrupted brusquely.

"Cut it short, guv'nor, we've got to be moving."

He left the passage door and came across to the boys, his right hand still suggestively in his coat pocket.

"Yes, yes, of course," said Vanstone. "Well, I must say goodbye," he added, turning to Sleepy and Feathers. "I am sorry to leave you like this, but there is nothing else for it. I trust you will be rescued in time."

With which he moved away, laughing softly to himself. The man was undoubtedly mad, but that made matters no better. Brooks was by no means mad, and one glance at his impassive face as he hustled them out of the vault by means of a second door set opposite the entrance to the passage, left them in no doubt as to the result if they tried to resist.

Brooks meant business and it was nothing to him that the boys were likely to stop in the underground labyrinth until their bones rotted—he was thinking only of his own safety.

A few yards along the short passage outside the vault, leading, they supposed, towards the house, they saw a second door. Brooks swung this open and motioned them towards a small, dank cell-like room, with his revolver. No sooner were they inside than the door was slammed shut, the sound of a massive key turning in the lock reaching their ears.

"Caught like rats in a trap," said Sleepy bitterly, flashing the torch, which had been left to them, round the dank walls of the cell.

The next moment he found his arm grasped fiercely.

"What's up?" he asked, staring down at Feathers.

"It's a chance," replied the naturalist, fumbling in his pocket and withdrawing a dazed and bewildered Nebuchadnezzar. "Not much of one, perhaps," he added, "but we might as well try it on."

From another pocket he took a large tie-on luggage label, which had been in his wallet ever since the beginning of term. Fortunately Sleepy had a pencil on him, and rapidly Feathers scrawled a message on the label, which he then tied round Neb's neck.

"If there's any way out of this hole," he said. "Neb will find it. Only don't bank on it, because anything might happen between here and Bracken."

Holding Neb in one hand he stroked his sleek head with the other.

"Go on, Neb, get moving," he whispered, and dropped the animal on the floor.

For a few seconds, watched with breathless interest by the boys, the rat sniffed round the floor. Then he tried to disengage himself from the luggage label, and finding it impossible, scampered over to the corner of the cell.

"It's no good," muttered Sleepy despondently. "There's no way out of here, even for a rat."

Even as he spoke there was a scuttering noise from the corner, and the next second Neb had disappeared, except for the tip of his long, pink tail. Another second this, too, had disappeared. Nebuchadnezzar was off on the trail.

The fact that there was some kind of opening large enough for a rat to slip through was proved in another way

shortly after Neb had gone. Low voices suddenly broke the silence, and investigation in the corner where the rat had disappeared, showed the boys that there was a small hole in the lower part of the wall; a hole too small to allow the insertion of even an arm, but large enough to allow the sound of voices to filter through. There was little doubt that these voices, easily recognisable as belonging to Vanstone and Brooks, came from the vault where the dud notes were printed. They remembered that the short passage between the two rooms had been set at quite an acute angle, the floor of the cell being about halfway up the wall of the vault next door.

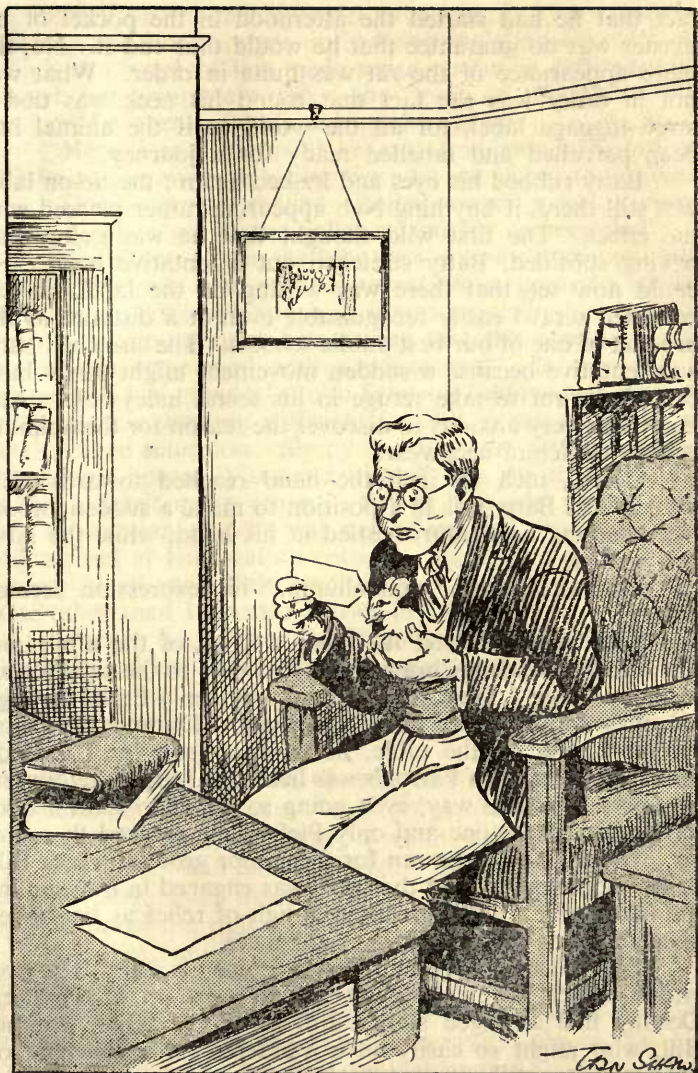
Feathers was kneeling by the hole in a flash, his ear close to it, his strained expression warning Sleepy against making the slightest sound.

CHAPTER XVII

ON A RED-HOT SCENT

BATTY, fast asleep in Study 6, opened his eyes as the school clock chimed five o'clock. When he had sat down he had firmly intended to do a spot of reading, in the vain hope of making up some of the leeway lost through giving rather too much attention to the case of the counterfeit notes. It being a warm day, however, and due to the storm more than usually close, Batty had finally succumbed to slumber. It is always unpleasant waking from a heavy afternoon nap; one's tongue feels dry and one's eyes bleary. It is always a moot point as to whether the pleasure of the nap is worth the unpleasantness of the awakening.

This afternoon Batty yawned, rubbed his eyes, passed his tongue round dry lips and prepared to drag himself to his feet. As he did so his eyes alighted on the table; with a gasp he sat down again. Bleary eyes are common enough after the post-prandial nap, but such a phenomenon as now greeted Batty is fortunately met with in the usual run only on the morning after the night before. Batty had not experienced a night before, but just the same, sitting on the table regarding him with sagacious eyes, was a large rat. This in itself was not unusual, for Nebuchadnezzar was frequently turning up at odd times and in odd places. The



Batty then received the second shock of the afternoon.

fact that he had started the afternoon in the pocket of his master was no guarantee that he would thus end it. No, the mere appearance of the rat was quite in order. What was not in order was the fact that round his neck was tied a large luggage label, for all the world as if the animal had been parcelled and labelled ready for a journey.

Batty rubbed his eyes and looked again ; the tie-on label was still there, if anything Neb appearing rather pleased with the effect. The first wild thought that he was going mad having subsided, Batty stretched out a tentative hand. He could now see that there was writing on the label, an uneducated scrawl easily recognisable even at a distance as the product of one of our best public schools. The stretched hand was tentative because a sudden movement might easily have caused the rat to take refuge in his secret hidey-hole. And Batty was very anxious to discover the reason for the animal's strange choice of neckwear.

Slowly, inch by inch the hand reached towards Neb, until at last Batty was in a position to make a sudden swoop. Neb, making no demur, nestled in his hand, while the label was untied.

"Go on, read it you chump," his expression seemed to say.

Batty then received the second shock of the afternoon. For a few seconds his brain refused to take in the significance of the message. Then, as perception suddenly broke through the enshrouding mists, he let out a yell. Dumping Neb unceremoniously on the table, he made a leap for the study door. His exit from Parson's was headlong. Brushing juniors brutally out of the way, even going so far as to slam a door in the face of the one and only Pieface, he reached the outer air. Never pausing he ran for the junior ground, where Bill, in the gloomy depths of the shed, was engaged in overhauling the two-stroke. Batty breathed a sigh of relief as he jabbed open the door and found him still there.

Two pieces of luck had already come his way. The two-stroke, which should by rights have been up at Peartree, Destiny had arranged should still be on the junior ground; Bill, who might so easily have wandered off somewhere on his own, was still engaged in tinkering with its engine.

Bill himself had no time to frame the astonished question which rose to his lips.

"We've got to get down to Bracken," gasped Batty, hurl-

ing himself on the machine and wrenching it from its stand. "Sleepy and Feathers are up at Vanstone's, prisoners."

Not a word of this made sense, as far as Bill was concerned, but completely under the spell of Batty's violent manner, he obediently started up the engine.

"Here, just a minute," he said, suddenly realising the risk he was running in taking the bike out in broad daylight.

"Don't argue," replied Batty, even more fiercely. "We've got to get to the police as quickly as possible."

Two minutes later the bike was roaring down the lane towards the main road. As they went, Batty poured a stream of words in Bill's ear; much of it was unintelligible, but Bill heard enough to make him realise that the case was once more wide open—and with a vengeance. It was only a matter of a few minutes' run to Sergeant Huthwaite's cottage, and that time was not sufficient for Bill to recover from his first numbed sensation. Sleepy and Feathers prisoners under Vanstone's house; Vanstone himself was the leader of the gang; it didn't make sense. Before he could prove to his own satisfaction that he was not asleep and dreaming, they had arrived at Huthwaite's cottage. Standing outside it was a long, black car, while smoking a pipe on the porch was none other than Inspector Shirley himself.

Patiently he listened to Batty's almost incoherent explanation. When it was over he put one or two terse, forthright questions.

"Let's have a look at that label," he said, reaching out a hand.

Batty passed it over, almost dancing with excitement. The man, he decided, must be a fool to stand about wasting time when Feathers and Sleepy were in such deadly danger.

"All right," said Shirley at last, "it looks straightforward enough. Sensible of them to draw a plan on the back showing the run of the passage."

The note, which had merely stated the salient facts—that the boys were prisoners, that Vanstone was the leader of the gang, and that the underground vault could be reached by means of the passage—Shirley carefully placed in his pocket book. There was still another matter to be attended to before the rescue party could head for Vanstone's house. Huthwaite was out on his beat, and there being no telephones up on the moors where he was patrolling, Shirley could only

leave a note for the worthy sergeant to await his arrival. This done, he turned to the boys.

"Come on, then. I suppose you want to have a hand in this?"

There was no doubt about that. Besides, they both knew the exact location of the cave which masked the entrance to the passage; Shirley by himself might spend hours searching for it.

"I'll follow," said Bill briefly, loath to leave his precious motor-bike behind.

The little procession then moved off. Shirley took the wheel of the police car, with Batty sitting next to him, drumming his fingers on the dashboard impatiently. Behind the car came the two-stroke, Bill completely uncaring whether he was seen by the entire staff of the school.

Leaving both the car and the bike at the foot of the river path, the trio walked quickly towards the cave where Sleepy and Feathers had taken shelter a few hours earlier. They reached it in just under fifteen minutes, and only a few moments later were scrambling under the hanging rock and fording the underground stream. Bill, who had only just made up his mind that he was not dreaming, examined the passage with interest. This, he decided, was a bit of all right—provided they rescued Feathers and Sleepy. Bill, ever an optimistic soul, decided that there should be no difficulty about that. And as it turned out, he was quite right.

The only obstacle the party encountered was the locked door at the top of the stone steps, and this Shirley dealt with very efficiently by putting a bullet through the lock. Up to the moment of finding the hidden entrance to the passage he had half wondered whether the little devils were pulling his leg, though Batty's scared and worried expression provided proof that he, at any rate, was innocent of any such attempt. The underground passage and the locked door, however, dispelled any lingering doubts in the detective's mind. Bracken he decided, evidently specialised in producing an unusual type of boy; this case ought to be quoted as a refutation of the oft-heard accusation that the public schools kill individualism. There had been enough and to spare exhibited by the inmates of Study 6!

The lock having burst at the first shot plugged through it, the party entered the vault in which Sleepy and Feathers had first been trapped. Here lay all the evidence the inspec-

tor needed: printing presses, bundles of special paper, dies, and even a few printed notes. For the moment, however, he was not interested in these. Opening the door in the other wall, he moved into the passage cautiously, in case any of the gang were still lurking about. Only emptiness met his gaze, however. The sound of knocking led him quickly to the door of the cell in which Feathers and Sleepy were, to judge by the row they were kicking up, still very much alive. In a matter of minutes they were freed.

"Gosh, old Neb did it," said Feathers. "What a rat!" he added.

For once, Study 6 were in complete agreement. Many had been the hard things said about Neb. Now, however, the Study magnanimously forgave the animal both past and future offences. He had more than proved his worth. By what devious routes he had made his way to the upper air, exactly how he found his way through that labyrinth of crumbling, underground passages to emerge eventually in Study 6 they never discovered. Sufficient was it that he had succeeded in this super-human task. When all was said and done, Nebuchadnezzar had left them all standing for sheer cleverness and gumption.

Feathers quickly recovered from the excitement of being rescued. He had important information to impart.

"What's the time?" he asked abruptly.

When they told him that it was just gone half-past five, he grasped the Inspector's arm urgently.

"We've got to get to Stoup," he said. "Vanstone is making the last distribution of dud notes to his agents at the Fair this evening. Sleepy and I overheard him discussing it with Brooks after they had locked us up. Come on, I'll explain as we go along."

Shirley looked at him hard for a moment, and then evidently convinced that he was not delirious, turned on his heel. At a rapid pace the party of five made their way back down the passage. As they went Feathers explained, in jerky, rapid sentences exactly what had happened in the vault that afternoon. When he reached the point where they had listened to the voices through the hole in the wall, the Inspector's manner sharpened.

"It's quite simple, really," said Feathers. "About the cock-fighting, I mean. Vanstone evidently started that racket,

for three reasons. First, as a blind, in the hope that if the police ever started investigating his activities they would get all muddled up with the cock-fighting and not think to look beyond that. Second, of course, the gang made quite a bit of money out of it, because from what we heard Vanstone saying to Brooks after we were locked up, they ran their own teams of birds, and wangled everything so that the farmers and people who went to the mains always lost. But those are not important reasons compared with the last one."

"And that?" queried the Inspector sharply.

Feathers grinned, his usual good spirits already recovered from the afternoon's adventures.

"Why, it was a wonderful opportunity for passing the dud notes to Vanstone's agents," he said. "I suppose they bought them off him for about a third the face value, and made their own profit by passing them all over the county. Instead of having to make complicated and risky arrangements to hand the duds over to the agents, Vanstone started the cock-fighting mains. Large sums of money were continually passing from hand to hand at the mains, and nobody would ever suspect that some of the transactions were not in settlement of wagers. The mains were really organised to provide a means for passing the dud notes to the agents."

After this lengthy speech, Feathers relapsed into silence, turning over in his mind the various horrible things he would like to do to Vanstone if ever that crook were captured. To fake blindness was bad enough, but to organise and take part in the horrible sport of cock-fighting was to the animal-lover the last straw. It made him see red to think of the birds tearing each other to pieces.

"You know, that was clever," broke in Bill when Feathers had explained about the cock-fighting mains. "And of course, the people there could never say anything, even if they did suspect that something fishy was going on. They were committing an offence themselves, weren't they?"

"That's so," replied Shirley grimly. "But you're right, Bill, it was clever."

By this time they had reached the end of the river path. Shirley and the three other boys climbed into the car, Bill following as before on the bike. He obstinately refused to leave it behind; and as it turned out, the case might have had a very different ending if he had allowed himself to be persuaded.

Back to Huthwaite's cottage they went, there still being no sign of the sergeant, who was thus missing the first real excitement that had come to Bracken for years. Shirley telephoned through to Stoup, rapidly giving orders which meant very little to the boys. It was obvious that he was arranging for the fair-ground to be kept under observation, but many of his remarks were cryptic in the extreme. Devoutly Study 6 trusted that the Stoup Superintendent would get his men there in time. Vanstone and Brooks had received a long start, and it was possible that they had already made their getaway, the last distribution of dud notes duly completed. Furthermore, as Shirley had been able to give only a verbal description of the two ringleaders over the telephone, it was on the cards that before the Scotland Yard man himself arrived, the crooks would have been able to make their escape.

If he was worrying about this aspect of the case Shirley did not show it as he led the way back to the car. That he was a sport was proved by the fact that he made no mention of dropping the boys. Perhaps he thought that they deserved to be in at the kill; at all events, they climbed into the car once more, Bill still sticking grimly to the motor-bike, with not a thought of the dire risks they were running with the school authorities. Lock-up was in half an hour or less; but Study 6 were unanimous in considering that events more than justified their absence from this event.

The car was a powerful one, and it was not long before Bill, plugging gamely along on the two-stroke, found himself left far behind. Two miles beyond Bracken, however, a rough track led over the fells towards Stoup, cutting more than a mile off the distance between the two towns. As he reached this track, Bill wrenched the bike round. Determined to arrive at Stoup before all the fun was over, he decided to run the risk of broken springs and take the bike across the fells.

He had not progressed more than a few hundred yards before he saw ahead of him the lumbering figure of Sergeant Huthwaite, who was standing glaring at his bicycle with malevolent eyes.

"Dang the thing," he muttered, as Bill drew level.

A glance at the back wheel showed that it was as flat as a pancake.

"Jump on the pillion," yelled Bill, "you've got to get to Stoup sharp. Inspector Shirley's orders," he added, as the sergeant viewed the diminutive pillion with much disfavour.

CHAPTER XVIII

BILL SEES IT THROUGH

ONE country fair differs very little from another; the same crowd—as it seems—mills round the ground; the same music makes the air raucous; the same swing-boats soar with giddy monotony overhead. Though the Stoup Fair was, in many ways, to prove very different from any other the boys had ever visited, when Inspector Shirley's car first drew up in the improvised car-park, little difference was apparent. The three inmates of Study 6 stared round expecting to find hordes of large policemen pretty nearly blotting out the landscape; when the only representative of law and order in view revealed himself as a certain portly constable of benign aspect. Batty, for one, was inclined to believe that Shirley's orders had badly miscarried.

"The Stoup Super is a good man," said the Scotland Yard detective, climbing out of the car. "He goes to work in an unobtrusive way," he added, evidently reading Batty's thoughts. "You see that chap over there? He usually wears a blue uniform."

He pointed to a large man in plus-fours, who was leaning negligently against the gate which gave entrance to the fair-ground. Batty felt duly squashed; his reading of detective thrillers should have prepared him for the fact that the police do not advertise their intentions when about to undertake a raid. No doubt, scattered about the ground, at all the strategic points, other burly men in plain clothes were keeping watch and ward.

Shirley and his little party strolled through the gate. At an imperceptible nod from the inspector, a man disengaged himself from the crowd, passed close, and as he did so dropped his pipe. By the time he had stooped to retrieve it he had imparted to Shirley the information that a large black car, answering to the description of Vanstone's vehicle, had arrived at the fair some half an hour earlier. The rats had walked into the trap; it now remained to close it securely—

after the crooks had been proved to have the goods on them. Shirley was determined this time to clean up the gang once and for all. Vanstone himself, though the most important prospective capture, was not sufficient; this evening provided a golden opportunity of closing in on the entire network of distributing agents and a huge quantity of their stock in trade—spurious notes. It therefore behoved the inspector to go carefully, to strike surely and quickly, but not impetuously.

During their leisurely perambulation round the ground, the party picked up plenty of other information. Whispered words from apparent strangers proved beyond doubt that the Stoup Superintendent was indeed a man who believed in working unobtrusively. It was also proved that he was an efficient officer and a quick-working one, for he had organised the affair thoroughly in a very short time.

There was one thing bothering Batty. He could not understand how any distribution of the dud notes was to take place at the fair. The organising of cock-fighting mains was a clever one, but surely no such illicit sport could be undertaken in the middle of a busy fair-ground? Therefore it followed, according to this line of reasoning, that for once Vanstone was relying on some other method. What that could be, Batty had no idea. Not a sign of the doctor nor of Brooks had they glimpsed by the time they had nearly completed the first circuit of the ground. Not only Batty, but the other two were beginning to wonder whether, after all, the wily Vanstone had given them the slip.

It was as they were approaching the car-park once more that the luck began to turn. Sleepy nudged the inspector's arm as he caught a glimpse of a little man slipping furtively through the crowds. Though the man's back was now turned to him, Sleepy had no doubt that his first impression had been correct—it was rat-face, whom he had last seen on the bridge over the river talking to Wythes. Though rat-face had not the slightest idea that his movements were from then on carefully noted, his progress across the ground was the subject of keen interest on the part of those he most wished to avoid. He had not a chance of avoiding observation, so efficiently did the Stoup Super's organisation work.

Rat-face was making straight for a large marquee pitched not on the fair-ground itself but in a field adjacent to it. At first sight one would have taken it for a staff tent, where the showmen perhaps kept their equipment. No crowds surged

round it, though a small gap in the hedge gave easy access to the main ground. As rat-face came to this gap his walk slackened; he gave a cautious glance over his shoulder, and after loitering for a few moments suddenly dived through the gap. As he did so, a man stepped from the other side of the hedge, passed a few words with him and then returned to his original position where the hedge completely hid him from the crowds of sightseers. Rat-face also disappeared, round the back of the marquee.

During the next ten minutes nine more men passed through the gap in the hedge. They came mostly one at a time, though twice a pair of farmers passed through together. Always the solitary watcher behind the hedge met them, a few words were exchanged and the men went on through the gap and so to the back of the marquee.

"What's the idea?" whispered Batty. "They can't be running a main here."

"I'm not so sure about that," replied the Inspector. "It sounds dangerous, but I doubt if it's as risky as it seems. After all, there's a deuce of a noise coming from the Fair, more than enough to drown any row they kick up in that marquee. They've put a man by the gap, who evidently makes sure that nobody goes through but the usual clients. Vanstone probably argued that this was as safe a spot as any other, if only because the police would think that he wouldn't have the nerve to run a main here."

If the Inspector's theory was correct, then the ramifications of the gang were even more far reaching than had been supposed. The proprietors of the Fair must be in the know, for example, or otherwise it would have been impossible to stage a main so audaciously. It looked as if Shirley was about to make the capture of his career, and in one fell swoop, bring in the entire gang. It was no wonder that as he moved quietly off to contact the Stoup Superintendent, leaving the boys with instructions to keep their eyes open for Vanstone, he should have been smiling cheerfully to himself. If everything went according to plan this case would be a distinct feather in his cap.

Within half an hour of seeing rat-face making for the marquee, the place was surrounded by plain-clothes men. This move had been made quietly and unobtrusively, for it was essential not to give the gang the slightest warning of

what was afoot. Cautious investigation had proved that behind the small field where lay the marquee, was a wood, providing excellent cover for a police cordon. The fair-ground itself was well patrolled, escape via that route being practically impossible. Everything was therefore in readiness, except for the absence of Vanstone and Brooks who had not yet shown up. Shirley was in a difficult position, for though it was likely that the two ringleaders were at that moment ensconced in the marquee, there was no proof of this, and if by chance they were not yet inside the trap any move would minimise the chance of capturing them.

The Inspector looked at his watch impatiently. He dare not delay his move too long, and yet to give the signal to close in prematurely was to invite disaster. It was a question of timing, though the factors which regulated this were not fully known by the man in charge. It was a tricky problem which Shirley did not relish. If only he could be certain that Vanstone was inside the marquee everything would be easy; without that definite knowledge, however, any move would be attended by the grave risk that he would miss taking the ringleader.

Once more the luck turned. Even as Shirley was debating whether he would strike now or wait yet longer, Vanstone, accompanied by Brooks appeared. They approached within a hundred yards of the hedge dividing the small field from the fair-ground proper, and then stood for a few moments talking. At last Brooks went on towards the marquee and Vanstone turned away. Evidently he was not to appear personally at the distribution of the dud notes, a fact which supported Shirley's theory that the doctor had always delegated this duty to Brooks. Even at the last, with the prospect of a getaway before him, he was no doubt averse to revealing his identity to the various agents congregated in the marquee.

Quickly Shirley made up his mind. At a signal from him, two men slipped through the crowd in the wake of Vanstone, who was strolling slowly towards the sideshows situated at some little distance from the small field. At almost the same moment, Brooks passed through the gap in the hedge and entered the marquee. A shrill whistle rang out and things began to move. The police cordon suddenly came to life; in a few seconds burly constables were entering the small

field and surrounding the marquee. The whistle was also the signal for the detectives following Vanstone to close in. They pushed aside the few people separating them from their quarry and reached out massive hands to make the arrest.

They were just too late. The whistle had caused Vanstone to wheel round; it had given him just that fraction of a second's warning he required. Even as the detectives reached out for him he writhed out of the way, ducked low and swarmed through the crowd. At once there was an uproar. The whistle had been heard all over the ground, and as miraculously as usual in such circumstances, it was not long before the whole seething mob of sightseers were aware that something was up over in the small field and that the police were on the job. Within a few moments the mob were milling around the entrance to the field, gaping at the stolid faces of the uniformed police who had come up to bar their way. Peering over the shoulders of these stalwarts the lucky ones could see the plain clothes men entering the marquee, could hear the sounds of uproar from inside the tented walls.

The sudden movement of the crowd towards that corner of the ground was Vanstone's salvation. Dodging and twisting, he broke through the fringe of the people and made for the hedge separating the fair-ground from the field. The detectives on his trail were swept up in the mad rush of excited spectators, and were helpless to prevent Vanstone breaking through the hedge. When they did succeed in reaching it, the doctor was already halfway across the field, running for his life.

Again whistles shrilled out, warning those in the woods fringing the meadow that the quarry was at large.

"He's made a break, sir," gasped one of the men, as Shirley came running up. "Look, there he goes," he added, pointing to where Vanstone was just entering the woods.

Shirley wasted no more words. He set off across the field, with the two detectives in his wake. Behind them, eager not to miss the kill, streamed Study 6. Not their full compliment, however, for Bill had still not put in an appearance. Where he was they had no idea, nor had they time to wonder. Whatever had happened to him however, had prevented him witnessing the most thrilling scene Batty & Co. had ever been privileged to see.

They arrived at the edge of the woods to find uproar breaking its stillness. Men were crashing out amongst the scrub; shouts and whistles were making the air hideous. Shirley grabbed one man and demanded what was going on.

"Don't rightly know, sir," replied the rustic constable. "Look out, there he goes," he yelled, grabbing the inspector's arm unceremoniously.

They had penetrated through the wood by now and were standing on its outer edge. Following the constable's finger they could see Vanstone scrambling through the hedge which lined the road not fifty yards away. Somehow or other, taking advantage of the surprise he had created by making for the wood, and the attention of the police being taken up by the incidents at the marquee, he had broken clean through the trees without being so much as touched.

Inspector Shirley ground his teeth. He had seen something else besides Vanstone crashing through the hedge. Fifty yards along the road, only just showing above the hawthorn, the roof of a car could be seen. Vanstone had evidently been prepared for all eventualities; the explanation of his attempt to reach the road was now obvious—he had parked a second car there just in case of accidents. The man was clever, there was no doubt about that. Even in the midst of all the excitement, Shirley still had time to acknowledge this.

As he himself reached the hedge Vanstone came within five yards of the car. Batty and Co. ploughed manfully over the field separating the wood from the road, arrived in time to see the man stretch out an eager hand for the handle of the driver's door. In another few seconds he would be away.

At this moment Destiny, who had arranged things with her usual admirable efficiency, brought out her ace of trumps. From down the road came a peculiar noise. For a few seconds even Batty & Co. did not recognise it, so intent were they on the drama being enacted before their eyes. Suddenly, however, its significance dawned on them.

"Bill!" gasped Batty, staring up the road.

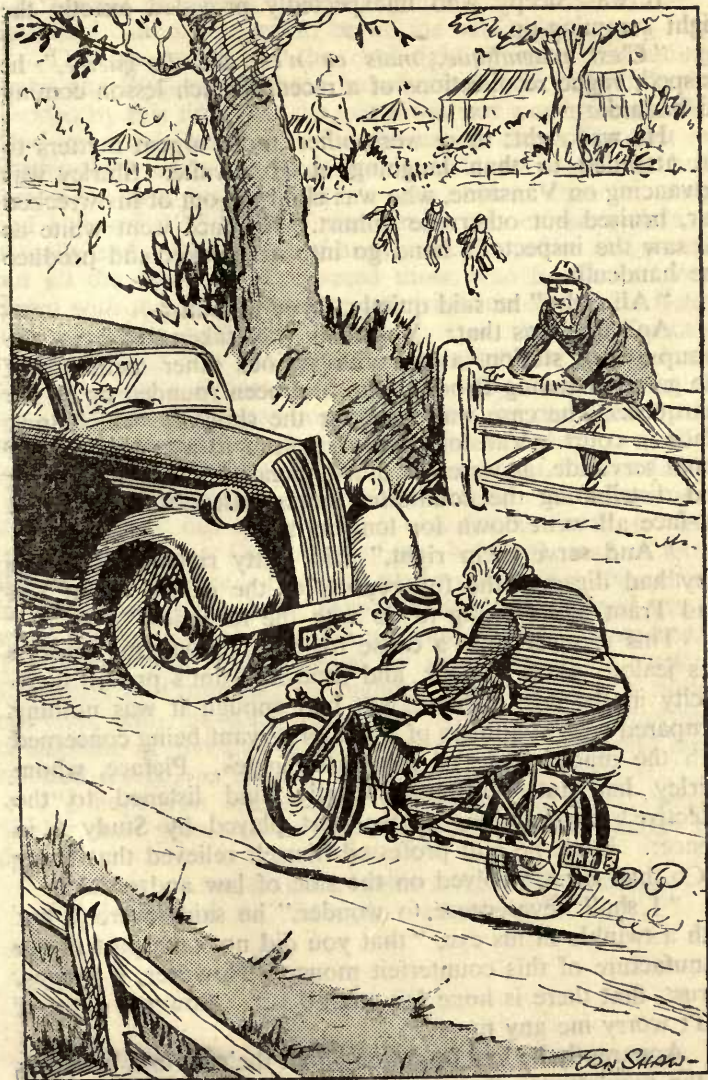
And Bill it was; Bill, riding the two-stroke like one possessed, tearing down the road towards the car which Vanstone was even now starting up. But not only Bill was sitting the two-stroke. Behind him, perched perilously on the diminutive pillion, was Huthwaite, bulging horribly, helmet long since gone literally to the winds, face white with

horror. He had never experienced such a journey as Bill had just treated him to. Apart from the fact that the bike had broken down and taken a long time to coax into motion, the travelling had been hideous. Huthwaite was a large and heavy man; the bike was small and not well sprung. Jolting and writhing over the rutted track across the fells, Huthwaite had wished he were dead. Even when the road was reached his troubles were not over, for Bill wrang from the protesting bike the very last ounce of speed, swaying and skidding at a hair-raising rate towards the fair.

Down the road tore the bike, Huthwaite clinging on for grim life, Bill clutching the handlebars desperately. The watchers on the bank stared with horror. The bike was within twenty yards of the stationary car; nothing, as far as they could see, could prevent a ghastly accident. Vanstone himself was for a moment struck motionless by the horrific spectacle. Then, at the last gasp he pulled himself together. With a roar the engine sprang into life. Quick as a flash the first gear was engaged, the clutch let out. With a twist of the wheel Vanstone swung the car over towards the opposite hedge. It was his only chance.

He was reckoning, however, without Bill. Afterwards that worthy swore that he had taken in the significance of Vanstone's presence in the car in a flash and had made up his mind deliberately. Study 6 found difficulty in believing this, but just the same had to admit that without Bill and his famous bike Vanstone might have got away. As it was, the bike altered course at exactly the same moment as Vanstone's car shot across the road. With a rending crash the two stroke tore into the side of it, stripped the rear near-side wing completely off, hurled Huthwaite high into the air and finally pitched over into the ditch. The car, considerably helped on its way, smashed into the hedge, hung there for a moment and then quietly subsided into the same ditch.

It was a sight Study 6 would not have missed for thousands. Signs of movement proving that nobody was badly hurt, they were at liberty to enjoy the unique scene. Bill sat in the grass by the side of the ditch, looking round vaguely; the bike lay, still spluttering, a twisted mass of inferior metal; Huthwaite, the portly, pompous Huthwaite sat cross-legged on the very top of the hedge, looking as if the end of the world had come.



With a twist of the wheel, Vanstone swung the car over.

It was Sleepy who unexpectedly provided exactly the right summing-up.

"*C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre,*" he gasped, vague recollections of a recent French lesson coming to his aid.

He was right; there were other, more urgent matters to be attended to than laughing at Huthwaite. Shirley was advancing on Vanstone, who was climbing out of his wrecked car, bruised but otherwise unhurt. His face went white as he saw the inspector's hand go into his pocket and produce the handcuffs.

"All right," he said quietly, "you've won."

And that was that. Vanstone was taken back to the Stoup police station, along with various other members of the gang, including Brooks, who had been rounded up in the marquee. The case was over bar the shouting, which took place in court. Vanstone was sentenced to a heavy term of penal servitude, as were the others engaged in manufacturing and distributing the counterfeit notes. Brooks, Percy, and rat-face all went down for long terms.

"And serve them right," said Batty righteously, when they had digested the full reports of the cases. "But I'm glad Trant had nothing to do with the forgeries."

This was certainly a cause for satisfaction, for Bracken was jealous of its honour, and though Trant's proved complicity in the cock-fighting was bad enough it was nothing compared with awfulness of a school servant being concerned with the manufacture of counterfeit notes. Pieface, whom Shirley had interviewed personally, had listened to the detective's explanations of the part played by Study 6 in silence. Later he had professed himself relieved that Batty & Co. had been involved on the side of law and order.

"I shall never cease to wonder," he said severely, but with a twinkle in his eye, "that you did not take part in the manufacture of this counterfeit money. However, it proves, I trust, that there is hope for you all yet. Now get out and don't worry me any more."

Apparently he had forgotten about their various breaches of the regulations; about Bill's illicit ownership of a motor-bike, about the breaking of bounds at night, about various other crimes. Or perhaps he had not.

"Not a bad bloke," said Bill generously. "Sometimes," he added cautiously, just to be on the safe side.

The frequenters of the cock-fighting mains, including Trant and Wythes, had been heavily fined and had no doubt decided by this time that the game was not worth the candle. The scrapbook had been of some use to the police, but as Shirley had said, provided no concrete evidence. It had served its turn, however, and it was obvious that the gang had believed it to contain more important evidence than it actually had. After a lot of hard work the police had sorted out all the facts and discovered those who had been associated with the manufacture and distribution of the dud notes and those who had merely taken part in the cock-fighting racket. Trant had not waited to be dismissed by Pieface. He had quietly departed, though he had enough sense to appear in court and pay his fine. What he proposed to do after that was not known. Probably he would go to Hollywood, Bill thought, and make his fortune as a film butler.

With the ending of the various cases in court, however, the affair was not quite finished—as far as Study 6 were concerned that is. One morning just before the end of term Bill received a letter. Enclosed was a cheque for £50, which in the accompanying letter Inspector Shirley explained was a small reward for the valuable assistance they had rendered. The money had been donated by the members of various Chambers of Commerce throughout Cumberland and Westmorland, who for some time had been worried about the circulation of the dud notes, especially as tradesmen had suffered severe loss through the activities of the gang.

"I hope you are not too proud to accept it," wrote Shirley, now promoted to Chief Inspector on the strength of the case.

Bill grinned, running his hands through his fiery hair.

"I don't think so," he said, "not really."

THE END.

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